



THE ORBITAL REGION: RE-ENVISIONING REVISION

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“If a teacher told me to revise, I thought that meant my writing was a broken-down car that needed to go to the repair shop. I felt insulted. I didn’t realize the teacher was saying, ‘Make it shine. It’s worth it.’ Now I see revision as a beautiful word of hope. It’s a new vision of something. It means you don’t have to be perfect the first time. What a relief!”

- Naomi Shihab Nye

There is a maxim that even the best writers struggle with the process of writing, but this struggle is never apparent! What we read and take in on a daily basis is often the final stage of writing. In other words, you never see the drafts and scratched-out notes and outlines a published (and revised) piece of writing goes through before you hold the final stage in your hands and drink it with your eyes. The myth is that writing well is a painless process. With this article I hope to dispel this myth.

It’s ironic that I’m writing a piece possibly trying to convince you, the reader, about the pleasures of the revision process. It’s ironic because I clutch and cling to the words I’m finally able to force through my fingers down through the pen onto paper, or through the keystrokes onto a monitor lit with light and memory. I cling to the words that finally end up on the page, and I resist the idea of taking any of them away, because I fear the more I pull the writing apart, the more it will unravel until I am left with only the ashes of my initial ideas.

The poet Naomi Shihab Nye speaks to her feeling of hope when she realized that to revise is to be more effectively heard. With words we make sense of our learning experience, particularly at Evergreen. I had a similar experience to the one Nye shares in the above quote. My first quarter at Evergreen I was writing short argumentative essays. I would consistently get the drafts back from my faculty with comments like, “You need to convince me.” I resisted the notion that I had to do anything else to prove what I felt were very obvious and succinct arguments. I felt proud of the writing I had done, and I was afraid that I would have to start from scratch if I wanted to rise to the challenge my faculty had set before me.

With practice and time I developed methods for this pulling apart, this unraveling of ideas, to actually get deeper into the ideas. One thing that propelled me was the realization that my faculty was actually saying, “It’s worth it for you to convince me.” I reveled in this challenge. Sure, it was exasperating, and frustrating; it meant I had to sit back down and sometimes start from scratch. It meant I had to get messy, which is really hard for me. It meant I had to let go of the words, ideas, and quotes I thought made the most sense and sometimes find all new evidence, or dump whole paragraphs. But it also meant that what I had to say mattered, and how I said it mattered even more.

Perhaps you have already read the other “Writing Grid” articles. I hope so, dear reader, because reading about these other parts of the writing process may finally help you see that writing is not all about a finished product. The Writing Grid exists to illuminate all the stages of writing, because the truth is, you can start from anywhere and get somewhere. The stages of writing are subtle, and they flow into one another. In an attempt to give you a technical definition of revision, I will say that revision should mostly consist of conceptual, textual, and transitional changes. All those mechanical and grammatical changes? Yes, they are a part of revision, but they are tertiary. Revision wants to focus on ideas, not commas or font changes or just cutting and pasting your paragraphs to different places.

Most writers start with an introduction and end with a conclusion and everything in between is pat and in place. Start with A, go to B then C then D, and then you’re done and you hand in your paper and when you get it back it says, “Too many commas,” and, “This isn’t how you use a semicolon.” Nye suggests that the revision process entails letting go of your idea of perfection. This may mean ignoring those red pen comments, and digging into the real process of revision: to see again.

This seeing again can sometimes feel overwhelming. It can feel like you’re constantly sifting and tweaking your ideas and transitions. Often when you think you totally have to start over, you’re really just starting. It’s sometimes the whole dumping process that casts light on where you’re really going. It is a courageous act to take a step back and gleefully cross out the lines or cut and paste: extract words and ideas; expand on words and ideas!

One way to step back from your own writing is to have another person review, read, or respond to your writing. Here’s where the Writing Center comes in. The folks at the Writing Center are fellow students: people who have ideas of their own, and have some good training in how to help you articulate your ideas. The word “tutor” doesn’t begin to really define what goes on in the Writing Center. The word tutor is often mistaken to mean needing to be fixed, or repaired. Working with a tutor on your writing is to have someone help you to see and think about your words and ideas from a new perspective. Working with a tutor on your writing is a chance for you to be more effectively heard.

The writing process itself is shadowy. It is fluid and liquid, and to my own dismay, there is no one right way of doing it. Writing is language and thought! Writing is dreaminess and desperate! Writing is you speaking to what you think and believe! And what a relief, as Nye says, that you don’t have to get it all right the first time. Revision for me, means letting go of what I think is the perfect form for my words. Dear reader, you have no idea how this article has evolved. This is my

eight draft, but really it's officially my fourth, because all the drafts in between were secret. I was mired in the revision process, which left me lost, like a starving mad woman out in the deep waters with no raft to hold on to. To write this article I brainstormed, got tutored, drafted, got tutored, at one point I even compared the Writing Center to a giant eyeball. But then I pushed through it. I let go of first one idea, then another. I let go of previous forms. I completely changed the whole damn thing, and finally, finally I have a conclusion and this is it.

WORKS CITED

Janeczko, Paul. *Seeing the Blue Between: Advice and Inspiration for Young Poets*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press, 2002.