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When Re-Writing Succeeds: An Analysis of Student Revisions

Byron Stay

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E. D. Hirsch remarks in *The Philosophy of Composition* that “the most efficient way of teaching revision principles will probably turn out to be the most efficient way of teaching composition.”¹ Recent research has substantiated the integral connection between composition and revision. As Linda Flower, John Hayes, and others have shown, writing involves a complex set of processes and sub-processes, and the act of revision cannot clearly be separated from the related acts of composing and writing.² Revision, then, is writing and the study of revision is the study of the writing process. Although revision theory receives increasingly more attention each year, it continues to be relatively unexplored territory. The most thorough study to date is a recent anthology of critical articles on the background and pedagogy of revision theory edited by Ronald A. Sudol.³ Previous scholarly articles had been confined to comparisons between the revision techniques of experienced and inexperienced writers,⁴ to differences between extensive revisers and nonrevisers,⁵ or to revision strategies of high school students.⁶ The present study examines the type and quality of revision techniques used by unskilled college writers composing in a writing center. It isolates the kinds of skills most troublesome for students to master, and offers suggestions on how best to teach these skills in a classroom.

In the writing center program described here, the instructor serves in two separate capacities: guide and evaluator. As guide, the instructor talks with students about preliminary plans, listens to ideas concerning composition, and encourages students to think carefully about the composing process. As evaluator, the instructor must switch roles to assess students' success in writing a composition. These two roles create a tenuous and often contradictory relationship between reader (instructor) and writer. Recent research in composition has emphasized the instructor's role as guide over the role as evaluator. As Nancy Sommers, Lil Brannon and C. H. Knoblauch have shown,⁷ instructors who comment on student essays with pre-conceived notions of what the writers meant to say risk short-circuiting the composing process by appropriating meaning which may not be there. Nancy Sommers, for instance, writes that "teachers' comments can take students' attention away from their own purposes in writing a particular text and focus that attention on the teachers' purpose in commenting."⁸ Our experience in writing center instruction has led us to concur with Sommers. The individual assistance given each student in this program allows the instructors to rely on oral comments and, more importantly, on oral responses. Instructors are often required to suspend their own assumptions of meaning in order to get at the students' intentions. Once the instructor intrudes by evaluating what is considered to be the intended meaning, the composing process will likely be terminated.

However, one must be careful to distinguish between the pedagogical techniques of writing instruction and the criteria used to identify and evaluate student progress. These are two quite independent functions of writing instruction. When the instructor and the student agree that the composing process has been completed and that no further drafts are desirable, the instructor is obligated to pose as a disinterested reader—an editor—and evaluate the student's success in *conveying* meaning clearly, concisely, and correctly. Performance, not intent, must be the criterion for this judgment. This professional judgment fulfills two important functions. First, it may form the basis for an objective grade. Second, and more important, the judgment itself becomes part of the instruction. The instructor must at some point say to the student, "although this draft reflects your intent much better than earlier drafts, here is where a reader might have difficulty with it." The student, in order to understand better the composing process, should then be shown how to examine changes between drafts in the same way that we will examine them here.

Methodology

The papers used for this analysis were those of twenty student writers who received grades of D or D+ in freshman composition at Mount St. Mary's College in Maryland. In order to satisfy the competency requirement stipulated by the college, each student attended the writing center during the first semester after completing freshman composition and wrote two papers that met the satisfaction of the writing center instructors. Each student understood that a paper was "passing" when two instructors agreed that it would receive a grade of C in a freshman composition course. Students were required to complete all writing in the center and save all drafts. Upon completing a given draft, students would discuss their writing and possible changes for the draft with a staff member in the manner described earlier. However, all writing was the student's own, and each student had to decide which changes would be most helpful. Often the instructor's suggestions were followed only partially or were not followed at all. Students whose papers were selected for this study eventually completed their essay requirements by writing between three and five drafts of their papers.

Taxonomy of Faigley and Witte

After beginning work on this project, I discovered that the recently published work of Lester Faigley and Stephen Witte provided an excellent taxonomy for the analysis of revision.⁹ Faigley and Witte use the categories of Chomsky—addition, deletion, substitution, rearrangement—to analyze revisions. In this system each change made between drafts is identified and classified as a surface or text-based change. Surface changes, which are sub-divided into formal and meaning-preserving changes, do not alter the meaning of a text. Text-based changes, on the other hand, alter the meaning of the text in various degrees. These are divided into microstructure changes (which leave the summary of a text intact), and macro-structure changes (which indicate major changes in the text). For example, students who left the logical structure and thesis of a paragraph intact and who, say, added or deleted an example or illustration, would be making a micro-structure change. A change which affected the summary of the text, however, such as the addition or deletion of an entire paragraph, would be categorized as a macro-structure revision.

Each of these four categories is in turn analyzed in terms of more specific changes:

- | | |
|--------------------|----------------------------|
| Surface Changes | Formal changes |
| | 1. Spelling |
| | 2. Tense |
| | 3. Abbreviations |
| | 4. Punctuation |
| | 5. Paragraph |
| | 6. Other Changes |
| | Meaning-Preserving Changes |
| | 1. Additions |
| | 2. Deletions |
| | 3. Substitutions |
| | 4. Permutations |
| 5. Distributions | |
| 6. Consolidations | |
| Text-based Changes | Micro-structure Changes |
| | 1. Additions |
| | 2. Deletions |
| | 3. Substitutions |
| | 4. Permutations |
| | 5. Distributions |
| | 6. Consolidations |
| | Macro-structure Changes |
| | 1. Additions |
| | 2. Deletions |
| | 3. Substitutions |
| | 4. Permutations |
| 5. Distributions | |
| 6. Consolidations | |

Addition indicates the inclusion of any material not found in the previous draft; deletions do the opposite. *Substitution* indicates the exchange of a word, sentence, phrase or paragraph for another (“it was a *good* job” / “it was a *fine* job”). *Permutation* indicates a re-arrangement. For instance, the student who wrote that she was responsible for “making sure [her] braces were *clean and shiny*,” and in the subsequent draft revised the phrase to read “shiny and clean,” made a

meaning-preserving permutation (since the change did not result in a significant alteration of meaning). *Distributions* take the concepts of a given passage and spread them over a larger area. For instance, one student wrote, “I prefer sports on television because of the information I receive from watching sports,” and later changed it to “I prefer sports on television. The information I receive from watching sports exceeds the information that a stadium fan would receive.” This change is a meaning-preserving distribution. *Consolidations* are those changes which reverse this process.

Taxonomy of Quality Changes

While this system is valuable in helping identify the kind of changes made as students move from draft to draft, it does not help identify the quality of such changes. I needed to know not just what kind of changes were made but whether or not the changes were successful. Therefore, in addition to the taxonomy used by Faigley and Witte, I have taken into consideration the quality of the changes made by each student. Each paper was compared carefully with its previous draft and each change was charted according to its taxonomy. Then a judgment was made as to whether the change clarified meaning, hindered meaning, or had no effect on meaning. Compare, for instance, these two sentences:

Draft 1

He can learn to live with the attitude the world is not safe from thieves.

Draft 2

They can learn to live with the attitude in which they will have to learn the sad trouble that the world is not safe from thieves.

Aside from the meaning-preserving substitution of “they” for “he,” the student has added the phrase “in which they will have to learn the sad trouble that” in draft 2. Technically, this constitutes a meaning-preserving addition since the student has not added any idea not contained in the original sentence. Clearly, however, the student’s experiment in developing this sentence has not succeeded. The additional phrase only serves to cloud meaning further. Such a phrase was recorded with a (–) to indicate that the change demonstrated a regression. Now consider these three sentences:

Draft 1

If you ever did that at a stadium you would probably get punched in the eye for lieing on someone.

Draft 2

If you ever did that at a stadium you would probably get punched in the eye for being on someone's lap.

Draft 3

If you ever did that at a stadium you would probably get punched in the nose for being on someone's lap.

The meaning-preserving substitutions of “being on someone’s lap” for “lieing on someone” in draft 2 and “nose” for “eye” in draft 3 are humorous, but serve no purpose in advancing the idea of the sentence. They are neutral revisions and were marked (0) to indicate the word or phrase did not significantly alter the meaning of a sentence. Changes actually improving sentence readability were marked by a (+). Take, for example, these two sentences:

Draft 1

In addition to the advantage of the instant replay there is the sports commentators.

Draft 2

Not only does the instant replay help the viewer to visualize a better picture of the play, but sports commentators add humor and information that is not available to the stadium fan.

In this meaning-preserving substitution the student demonstrated a sense of direction absent from the original. Such a passage was marked (+). The proportion of these positive changes against negative and neutral changes will be referred to as the “improvement ratio” or “IR.” The IR indicates the percentage of changes actually contributing to the readability of the text.

Results

The following chart tabulates the number and type of quality changes made by the twenty writers on all drafts:

TABLE 1
Number and Quality of all Words Revised
Per 100 Words

	+	0	-
Formal Changes			
1. Spelling	1.9	.3	.9
2. Tense	1.1	.2	.3
3. Abbreviations	.4	.2	.1
4. Punctuation	4.1	.8	1.0
5. Paragraph	.4	.1	.1
6. Other Changes	.6	—	.1
Meaning-preserving Changes			
1. Additions	26.2	17.9	3.8
2. Deletions	15.0	5.5	.8
3. Substitutions	21.0	15.3	5.0
4. Permutations	13.2	30.0	4.5
5. Distributions	12.9	5.6	2.3
6. Consolidations	5.5	3.0	2.4
Micro-structure Changes			
1. Additions	44.8	24.1	9.0
2. Deletions	14.7	2.1	—
3. Substitutions	36.4	15.2	2.3
4. Permutations	8.4	44.3	14.2
5. Distributions	9.0	—	1.7
6. Consolidations	—	—	—
Macro-structure Changes			
1. Additions	38.7	17.9	—
2. Deletions	—	—	3.3
3. Substitutions	41.2	32.9	—
4. Permutations	4.2	—	3.3
5. Distributions	24.5	—	—
6. Consolidations	—	—	—

These results differ remarkably from those of Faigley and Witte. Students writing in a lab actually revise far more extensively than do students who receive no instruction. It was found that students revised an average of 592.6 words per thousand (whereas Faigley and Witte found that inexperienced student writers revised an average of 173 words per thousand without any assistance). Obviously, students composing in a writing laboratory find making revision much easier (and more necessary!) than those students writing on their own. However, a large percentage of these changes do not alter the readability of the text. It was found, for instance, that of all revisions, 57% were positive, 10.5% were negative, and 32.5% were neutral. The large number of non-productive changes (43%) indicates that inexperienced writers are not able to analyze the weaknesses in their own writing. Nor was any significant improvement found in the students' ability to revise more successfully in later drafts, as the following table illustrates:

TABLE 2
Percent of Quality Changes per Draft

	+	0	-
First Revision	49.6%	40.0%	10.4%
Second Revision	66.9%	24.4%	8.7%
Third Revision	59.6%	26.2%	14.2%
Fourth Revision	53.5%	36.1%	10.4%

As this table shows, inexperienced writers tend to "peak" during their second revision (third draft) and in subsequent drafts become more sloppy and imprecise.

This study also shows that most of the changes made by inexperienced writers in a writing center are text-based, and of all text-based changes alterations in micro-structure occur most frequently. Most often, students are prone to re-ordering or re-working sentences within a paragraph. Again, this differs remarkably from studies which measure the revisions of students writing without any tutorial aid:

TABLE 3
Total Number and Type of Revised Words Per 1000 of
Tutored and Untutored Students

	Tutored	Untutored*
Surface		
Formal Changes	12.6	38.9
Meaning-Preserving Changes	189.2	113.4
Text-based		
Micro-Structure Changes	225.3	19.7
Macro-Structure Changes	165.5	1.3

*Faigley and Witte

One reason for the high number of macro-structure changes is that many students voluntarily revised their first draft extensively after consulting with an instructor. The primary impetus for such a revision nearly always came from the students, who in the discussion realized they had more to contribute than was evidenced in the original drafts. Usually, this type of revision was made on the second draft. The relatively low number of surface changes may be partially attributed to the instructor who helped keep the students' attention fixed on larger questions of organization, especially in early drafts.

Although students seemed to have less trouble making formal corrections than any other category, they were still only able to improve 67.7% of the time. They seemed to have most difficulty with spelling (61.6% IR) and paragraphing (60% IR). Meaning-preserving changes, which accounted for 31.9% of all words revised, gave students the most trouble. Less than half (49.4%) of all meaning-preserving changes improved the text. Students were only successful in making deletions (70.5% IR). Distributions (when they occurred) were marginally successful (61.8% IR). But students could make improvements little more than half the time in additions (54.8% IR) and consolidations (50.6% IR). Students had extreme difficulty with permutations (27.6% IR).

A similar pattern was repeated in micro-structure changes. Again, students were successful in making deletions (87.4% IR) and were equally successful with distributions (84.2% IR). They also seemed to have a little more success with substitutions (67.5% IR) and additions (57% IR). However, students had even more difficulty making micro-structure permutations (12.5% IR). No micro-structure consolidations were recorded.

Students had more success with macro-structure revision than any other level. Macro-structure changes accounted for 27.9% of all words revised, and nearly all occurred in the categories of addition (68.4% IR), substitution (55.6% IR), and distribution (100% IR).

Evaluation

Students were successful in making deletions chiefly because they had little difficulty recognizing passages that were clearly "bad" and eliminating them. Other kinds of changes are not quite as easy to explain. I would suggest, however, that students' relative success in making distributions occurs because distribution, especially on the macro-structure level, requires an understanding of the inter-relationship between parts, and often results when students develop ideas with

examples. Thus, macro-structure distributions seldom occur randomly and imply some recognition of logical development. For instance, one student wrote in his first draft:

Television has been criticized lately for it's lack of depth. Books have never come under such scrutiny. Since it is assumed a personal universe has been created by a book, it would be criticizing someone's view. If a book is not well written or has poor style, it is simply left. Yet today, T.V. is maligned for it's programming. It is blamed for lacking the imaginative flair of literature. Like books, not all T.V. is good, but T.V. is also governed by the whim of ratings. Often very good examples of television are short lived shows missed by a few local souls.

In the second draft, however, he decided to break up and develop the topics of TV and books separately:

Television has often been criticized for its lack of depth. It is blamed for lacking the imaginative flair of literature. Like books, not all television is good, but T.V. is under the constant pressure of ratings. If a program is not widely watched, products being advertised are not sold and sponsors remove their funding. T.V. is also governed by the fact that only one show may be watched at a time. Because T.V. plays such a large part of our lives, it is much more readily condemned when it is poor.

Books seldom come under such scrutiny. If a book is poor, it is simply left unread. It is the product and thus will not be pulled off the market due to the influence of an unrelated product. J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* did not become widely read until the 1960's, 20 years after it's publication. A book is there to be read until it wears out. A television program is given one chance to sell, if it fails, it will never be shown again.

This macro-structure distribution has certainly improved the readability of the passage because, quite clearly, the student recognized between drafts that the original paragraph actually consisted of two topics, and this discovery led logically to his choice of revision technique.

The central reason for students' difficulty in making successful permutations was their propensity for sentence re-arrangement. This occurs when a student recognizes a problem in the organization of the paper and hopes to remedy it by moving sentences around the page indiscriminately. Consider the following example. The repeated sentences have been underlined and numbered to indicate the extent of sentence rearrangement:

Draft 1

¹Basketball is a fast played game. ²Being at the game allows you to see the players performing, the players on the bench, and the coach. ³Seeing the performance live you can really get involved. ⁴Not only do you get to meet the players live

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after the game, but you can enjoy the half-time entertainment. ³At the games you get an opportunity to really express yourself by clapping, laughing, and whistling without feeling uncomfortable. ⁴Not only do you get to meet the players after the game, but you can enjoy the half-time entertainment.

⁷Basketball is a fast played game. ⁸When seeing Basketball live the intensity and tempo of the game keep you on the edge of your seat. ⁹The spectators excited and cheerful make the game more intense.

¹⁰After seeing the Washington Bullets play at the capital center live it showed me all the extra exciting performances I was missing. ¹¹Being there live really made me enjoy the game more. ¹²The crowd, the scenery and the intensity made me almost want to play. ¹³Once you have seen a professional basketball game live you will never watch it on television again.

¹⁴Therefore, if you want to enjoy your favorite sport make sure you view it live.

Draft 2

Watching basketball live you can really get involved; seeing the performance live. After seeing the Washington Bullets play at the Capital Center live I will never watch basketball on television again. Not only do you get to meet the players live after the game, but you can also enjoy the half-time entertainment. The spectators excited and cheerful make the game more intense. When seeing Basketball live the intensity and tempo of the game keep[s] you on the edge of your seat. At the games you get an opportunity to really express yourself by clapping, laughing, and whistling without feeling uncomfortable. Therefore, if you want to enjoy your favorite sport make sure you view it live.

Although the sentences have been re-ordered (3-10-13-6-9-8-5-14), they have not been improved. The student obviously recognized that an organizational problem existed but failed to understand how it could be cleared up. As a result the sentences are randomly re-ordered in hopes that the new structure will magically make them better. Although re-arrangement may occur as a meaning-preserving, micro-structure, macro-structure, revision, rarely does it improve the organization or readability of the text. In fact, in this study it only helped improve texts in 9.1% of the cases. Re-arrangement occurred in the writing of 9 students (45%), and for these students made up a total of 17.3% of all words revised.

While students seemed to have difficulty making substitutions at the meaning-preserving and micro-structure levels, they were much more successful at macro-structure substitutions. One reason for this might be that when students made changes on this level they usually had a better understanding of the organizational structure of the text. Students

who made complete overhauls of their texts, who wrote drafts using the central idea of the original but with new focuses and examples, made the most observable progress. Six students (30%) made this kind of total revision and all but one significantly improved their drafts. Often the differences in clarity, organization, and development in a wholesale revision resulted in remarkable and immediate improvement. Nearly always, this kind of revision took place between the first and second drafts. Consider these opening paragraphs from the first three drafts of one student essay:

Draft 1

Reading a book and watching a television program differ in many ways. One such area in which they differ is the method in which each activity is carried out. Another has to do with the question "Is there any educational value in TV? Lastly is the extent to which the imagination is put to use. These 3 basic ideas are the main variants between watching tele. and reading a book.

.....

Draft 2

Neither the silver screen nor television can compare with a fine novels overall excellence. This gap in the degree of quality can be attributed to anyone of a variety of strengths contained in a novel. Two of these fortes are specifically are the concise details in a book and the strong role that imagination is delegated by the author. It is the combination of these elements that brings a book to life. So much so that the text on a page becomes more vivid and colorful than any film could be.

.....

Draft 3

Neither the silver screen nor television can compare with a fine novel's overall excellence. This gap in quality is largely a question of detail and the role of the imagination. It is the combination of these elements that brings a book to life, so much so that the text on a page becomes more vivid and colorful than any film could be.

The first paragraph suggests a general organization—which was not really followed—but is otherwise vague and simplistic. The second paragraph, like the first, mentions the use of imagination, but otherwise has undergone a considerable transformation in both diction and form. It is pretentious and wordy, but certainly represents an improvement and typifies the kind of revision made throughout the entire

draft. The third paragraph differs less from the second than the second from the first. Here the writer expands upon the implications of the pretentious vocabulary in the second draft and develops it into a fairly sound opening paragraph.

Again, the improvement in evidence here indicates not so much that the student has sharpened his technique as much as it does that he has slowly discovered what it is he wants to say. The trick of inducing the successful macro-structure change (like the successful distribution) lies in getting the student to internalize units of meaning. The teaching of revision techniques needs to focus on the paragraph rather than word, on the essay rather than the sentence. Of course word choice and sentence structure are important, especially in editing, but the sweeping changes we often expect between early drafts only come after students have conceptualized the essay super-structure.

Recommendations

The most surprising and helpful finding of this study was the student's relative success in making macro-structure changes under the guidance of a writing center instructor. Many students, in fact, were able to make the same kind of holistic changes researchers had previously associated only with experienced writers.¹⁰ One reason writing center instruction succeeds so well in teaching macro-structure revision might be that student/teacher conferences held after the first drafts were written consisted primarily of talking *through* the ideas found on the original draft. The role of the instructor at this stage was more collaborator than corrector. As students discussed the topics (rather than only the mechanical difficulties), emphasis shifted away from surface corrections to idea communication.

While this kind of close collaboration is a clear advantage of the writing center context, it does not need to be neglected in the classroom. Mina Shaughnessy recognized this when she wrote that

The teacher must try to decipher the individual student's code, examining samples of his writing as a scientist might, searching for patterns or explanations, listening to what the student says about punctuation, and creating situations in that classroom that encourage students to talk openly about what they don't understand.¹¹

Once students become interested in what they have to say, and recognize that others are also interested, they have taken an important step toward successful writing.

The most effective writing classes are likely to be those which focus attention on revision techniques while providing ample opportunity for students to revise freely. It is probably a mistake, for example, to require revision only after the essay has received an initial grade.

Students are likely to see such revision either as punishment for failing to satisfy the teacher or as a reward to raise grades for the extra work. Richard Beach recognizes this danger when he writes, “one reason that students often do not engage in substantive revising of rough drafts is that teachers generally assess only the final drafts.”¹² Instead of requiring students to revise rejected “final” drafts which are commented upon but left ungraded, it might be better to use revisions as preliminary steps toward a final draft. Writing instructors need to be aware not only of the problems faced by basic writers, but of their strengths as well. Knowing what basic writers do best may provide an important clue in discovering a successful writing pedagogy.

Notes

¹E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Philosophy of Composition* (University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 162.

²Linda Flower and John R. Hayes, “A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” *College Composition and Communication*, 32 (December 1981), 365-387; see also Nancy I. Somers, “The Need for Theory in Composition Research,” *College Composition and Communication*, 30 (February 1979), 46-49.

³*Revising: New Essays for Teachers of Writing*, ed. Ronald A. Sudol (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1982).

⁴Nancy Sommers, “Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers,” *College Composition and Communication*, 31 (December 1980), 378-388; Lester Faigley and Stephen Witte, “Analyzing Revision,” *College Composition and Communication*, 32 (December 1981), 400-414.

⁵Lillian S. Bridwell, “Revising Strategies in Twelfth Grade Students’ Transactional Writing,” *Research in the Teaching of English*, 14, No. 3 (October 1980), 197-222; Richard Beach, “The Effects of Between-draft Teacher Evaluation Versus Student Self-evaluation on High School Students’ Revising on Rough Drafts,” *Research in the Teaching of English*, 13, No. 2 (May 1979), 111-119.

⁶Richard Beach, “The Effects of Between-draft Teacher Evaluation Versus Student Self-evaluation on High School Students’ Revising on Rough Drafts,” p. 111.

⁷Nancy Sommers, “Responding to Student Writing,” *College Composition and Communication*, 33 (May 1982), 148-56; Lil Brannon and C. H. Knoblauch, “On Students’ Rights to Their Own Texts: A Model of Teacher Response,” *College Composition and Communication*, 33 (May 1982), 157-66.

⁸“Responding to Student Writing,” p. 149.

⁹Lester Faigley and Stephen Witte, pp. 401-405. These categories have also been used by Nancy Sommers, “Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers.”

¹⁰“Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers,” p. 386.

¹¹Mina P. Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 40.

¹²Richard Beach, “Self-Evaluation Strategies of Extensive Revisers and Non-Revisers,” *College Composition and Communication*, 17 (May 1976), 160-164.