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Color, Re-vision, and Painting a Paper

Mary Bartosenski

I built that paper, like a painting. You can’t do a painting at one sitting; if it’s just whipped off you can tell. Some artists can do that, just like some people can do a paper the night before it’s due, but some people have to work harder, and I’m one of them.—Marianne.

As Erika Lindemann points out in A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers, “True revision involves reseeing, rethinking, and reshaping the piece, resolving a tension between what we intended to say and what the discourse actually says” (28). When Marianne first came to the Colby Writers’ Center, she wanted to be able to write what she “intended to say,” to learn how to recognize when she was writing something else. Not only did she accomplish this, but she also showed me how to re-see revision. Working with bright-colored Crayola® felt-tip pens, she developed a technique of rewriting her papers in layers, both vertically and laterally, building her meaning “like a painting.” The journal entries that follow not only explore Marianne’s revision but also reflect my own reseeing of the writing process.

March 13, 1990: I’ve just had one of those nightmare tutoring sessions that we all dread. A young woman came in, bright with an artificial cheer that told me tears were only being held off by the anger she felt toward her professor and the certainty that she’d been wronged. A crumpled and folded copy of the offending essay exam was placed on the corner of the table farthest
from her; she refused to look at it. This, I could tell, was not going to be an easy session.

At first she wasn’t sure where to begin, even hesitated to introduce herself; then it all poured out of her. She was having trouble getting the assigned reading done for her classes; she wanted to know if I could give her any suggestions to allow her to read faster. Currently she used a piece of paper to keep her line, by covering up what she’d just read so she wouldn’t reread it. She said she was easily distracted and that she often lost the thread of her thought. And the same thing happened with writing—she couldn’t seem to write down the thoughts that she had and her sentences always seemed to turn around what she’d meant to say. She added she was being tested for a learning disability—she wouldn’t find out the results until next week.

Marianne wanted suggestions on how to “catch” her meaning; she wanted to write better. In particular she wanted to know how to “do” essay exams. She did not want to go over the exam she’d brought.

I wasn’t sure where to start—I itched to look at her exam, to get a sense of her writing style and to surreptitiously check out the professor’s comments. But she wasn’t about to be persuaded to return to her exam—the “wound” was still too raw. And without looking at anything written, I felt a bit adrift. Sure, I had her comments, complaints, and gripes, but I didn’t know how much faith to put in them. Maybe she was just worked up over something that was relatively small. Besides, the note of “my prof hates me” was sounding over and over, accompanied by “I can’t write.” The question of a learning disability was rather overwhelming; I wasn’t sure where to begin or how to address it.

I suggested brainstorming and freewriting as a way to get her thoughts down on paper; she told me that they wouldn’t work because she couldn’t write what she meant. “I can tell it to someone but I can’t write it,” she kept stressing. Maybe she could use a tape recorder? She thought about this for a moment before she countered, “Too much time transcribing.” How about talking to the paper and jotting down main ideas? “I’d feel silly.” Since she was an artist, I branched off into visuals. Drawings, clusterings, and diagrams were all thrown out. Although still sympathetic (and starting to feel challenged), I was quickly running out of ideas. Everything I suggested she immediately shot down. However, she was still listening, and I hoped that later, when she’d had time to calm down, perhaps something would click. As we finished off the session, I threw out an idea I’d read in a recent learning disability article—what if she tried writing with colored pens? They might make it easier for her to see what she was writing. “I’ll think about it,” she promised.
April 13, 1990: To show me her writing style, Marianne brought in her first Chinese Art paper. She warned me that tests had indicated she had a mild learning disability. Then she gave me a clean copy of her paper, asking me for my comments, while she looked at the “corrected version.” This was definitely a test of my ability. Although her attitude was fairly positive, I knew the slightest provocation would bring back the tones of our last meeting—I could see her waiting for me to say something that disagreed with the professor’s comments. Her paper did have problems; it seemed caught between an argument and a descriptive “encyclopedia” entry. For example, her introduction read:

Dating and identifying ancient objects is a very difficult and laborious process. In the case of ancient tomb figures it takes on a whole new dimension of problems. An example of a perplexing piece for dating is a grey pottery tomb figure (ming ch‘i) of a foreign groom. (fig. 1) It was dated to the Wei period which spans the years 386-535 AD (Northern Wei Dynasty). The dating seems to be based on the style of dress and his pose. These two forms of dating seem to be accurate, however, the face resembles the faces of foreign tomb figures dated to the later T‘ang Dynasty. In particular the Wei period figure resembles the Uighurs, who enter in historical terms in the T‘ang dynasty which follows the Six Dynasties period.

The thesis statement is not clear. The Uighurs come out of nowhere and the focus of the essay (the confusion in dating this piece of tomb art) is hidden in the final clause (the idea that the Uighurs didn’t arrive until the next dynasty). The connection between the piece and her plan for the paper (what she’ll be doing and why) is not established; as a result, the essay jumps around. For example, her next paragraph discusses the Uighur trade routes. It’s not until the fourth page that I get a clearer indication of her thesis (comparing the piece to the art of another dynasty is one way to find out where the piece fits) and the problems she’s having with dating this figure:

This comparison tends to prove that the unknown (fig. 1) is a Uighur Turk. However, the problem still remains that the Uighurs have not yet migrated, by the sixth century, to the trade routes region. This obviously creates a problem with historical facts and the clues given by the facial features of the Foreign Groom. . . . How can this piece resemble the Uighur people as well as it does at least a hundred years before the Uighurs arrive?
But before she arrives at her main point (how to resolve the problem with dating this piece), she detours through Buddhist art in the Wei dynasty, a detour which even she doubts is relevant when she writes: “Comparing the Buddhist art with the mortuary art is not a good comparison as they represent two completely different purposes.”

In addition to the confusion surrounding her purpose for the essay, she has sentences that do little to describe her figures. “The Northern Wei Dynasty’s tomb figures characteristically stand with a rigid frontal stance” and “Even Figure 8 sits his horse in a rigid manner.” How is it rigid? How does she know? What characteristics or details tell her? Or “the elongation in form can be realized because the tomb figures seem tall.” Yet she can write better descriptions:

The unknown figure is wearing a hat not worn by any of the Wei pieces. He has a pointed, full beard, a large mouth with big lips, and large wide-open eyes.

In a comparison between the unknown and another tomb figure she writes, “their hands are clasped on their chest as if they were praying. . . . The warrior has a similar outfit except the warrior’s dress has markings on it as if it had been made out of a coarse material.” She knows the details she needs to use, but she’s getting lost in the actual workings of her comparison. Her points are assumed, or understated in the writing, and her assumptions aren’t always clear.

I guess I passed the test, since I was stumped by the same sentences as her professor. But we were working on a “dead” draft—she wasn’t allowed to rewrite the paper and she really didn’t want to work on it ever again. We talked a little about what she might do to avoid these mistakes and what she could do to help herself see them. I asked if she had tried working with color; she said she used black and blue ink, but that was it. “I’ve got some Crayola® pens—maybe I’ll try using them,” she added.

May 3, 1990: Marianne came in today with a rough draft. What a difference from our first session! Again, the assignment was to place an unknown work in its period; this time she’d already figured out the period and even the artist’s name. In addition to supporting her dating, she wanted her paper to show how she figured it out. She was very confident; she immediately took possession of the table, spreading out several art books and portfolios, opening them to the pages she needed, getting out her unknown, giving me a copy of her rough draft, and uncapping fuchsia and turquoise felt-tip pens. For the first half of the session she gave me background
information; we looked at the paintings and she clarified the relationship between Wang Hui, the artist of the unknown, and the three other artists, Wang Shih-min, Fan K’uan, and Wang Meng. In Chinese art of this period, there was a tradition of copying previous masters’ works; Wang Hui was both continuing this tradition and breaking it. Marianne wanted to describe Wang Hui’s technique by comparing and contrasting two of his copies with the “originals.”

The way she came in and the intensity with which she started working reminded me of Peter Elbow’s description of revision:

> Figuring out what you really mean to say, getting it clear in your head, getting it unified, getting it into an organized structure, and then getting it into the best words and throwing away the rest. (Writing Without Teachers 38)

She had finished her “figuring out” and was ready to “[get] it into the best words.”

However, she couldn’t see where her points were left out of the sentences. Broad artistic terms, like “orthodox style” and “calligraphic brush,” undoubtedly supported her argument, but they needed some explanation to show how. Several of her sentences turned back on themselves; others were simple and obvious; many were redundant. We adopted this pattern of working on the paper: I would read a paragraph to her, ask her what sounded okay and what might need more work; if she couldn’t find anything, I’d ask “naive” questions to prompt an explanation. Then she would go to work on her copy of the paper—the bright fuchsia pen would slash words and sentences, rearranging the thoughts in the margin. Today we concentrated mainly on the introduction, pinning down the relationship between the artists, then working on her thesis.

When we arrived at “orthodox style,” she showed me another painting. Her accompanying explanation was so clear that I told her to write it down: “The smooth rounded arcs that make up the small hillside resemble brush strokes seen in the calligraphy on the colophon accompanying the painting.” I had to “hold” some of the words for her, reminding her what she’d said to me when she lost her thought while writing her sentence down; however, I never changed her words or added any. She was extremely pleased with this sentence, and even a little amazed at what she’d written. That fuchsia sentence allowed Marianne to realize she not only had the words she needed to convey her points but also the ability to arrange those words in a clear sentence. For the first time her point was not getting lost in the translation from mind to page. When the session ended, Marianne seemed eager to continue on her own.
May 4, 1990: Wow! What a change. We adopted the same routine as yesterday: art books surrounded us, we each had a copy of the draft, I read and questioned, she answered and rewrote. But the difference between yesterday's draft and today's was enormous. She'd opened up the paragraphs about the paintings with some excellent description, aptly capturing the similarities and differences of the works. There were still awkward spots and jumps, but the paper was starting to flow. Today she used both colors, working in fuchsia first, then reading through those changes and revising them with turquoise. As the session went on, the paper became a colorful mess:

Making a mess means that your revising tool is not a touch-up brush, to start with anyway, but a chain saw. It means that you can't possibly revise without stopping and thinking hard about what you really mean, about what you are trying to accomplish—even if you think you already made those decisions. (Elbow, Writing with Power 146)

Marianne wasn't satisfied with the thinking she'd already done; several times she wrote a bright fuchsia "work on" in the margins.

When we came to the paragraph describing Wang Hui's master's version of a Fan K'uan painting, Travelers among Streams and Mountains, we hit a momentary block. Marianne had some good descriptions of the differences she saw in the paintings, but they were in simple, subject/verb sentences. As we did whenever we hit a snag, we returned to the paintings. This time I suggested she jot down on a scrap piece of paper the key phrases she mentioned as we talked. Thus, "shale-like," "layers," "jagged," and "thin edge" became "The mountains in both have a shale-like layered appearance and a jagged paper thin edge." The fuchsia pen slashed and rewrote; the turquoise followed behind, adding or subtracting a word or comma.

Her work on this paragraph paid off in the next one, when another scrap piece of paper with its bright notes yielded:

A difference can be seen in the gradation of color varying from light (near) to dark (far) in the mountains of Wang Hui's Travelers; the mountain edges in Wang Hui's copy are rounded off instead of jagged as they are in Fan K'uan's. The result of the changes is a more three dimensional quality...

This description prompted a sentence that tied the comparison to her thesis: "[Wang Hui] synthesized the style of Fan K'uan with the advancements in the painting technology from the time of Fan K'uan in the Sung dynasty to the Ch'ing dynasty." When our session ended, she had a clearer idea of where
she was going next and how it all tied together.

May 7, 1990: Having laid the background for Wang Hui's techniques, Marianne was now ready to turn to her unknown, a Wang Hui version of a painting by Wang Meng called *Elegant Gathering Among Forests and Streams*. Again she used comparison and contrast to make her point:

The changes Wang Hui made resulted in a less confusing painting, because the different areas were painted with varying degrees of detail, from very descriptive brush strokes in the foreground (leaves on the tree) to remote washes of paint suggesting objects in the background (distant mountains).

She then examined how the two artists used human figures:

The people in Wang Meng's *Elegant Gathering Among Forests and Streams* are small details in a large, attention-grabbing painting. Because of the overwhelming details resulting in a lack of depth, the viewer perceives that no one detail is the center of attention. . . . However, in Wang Hui's painting there are three people who attract the viewer's attention.

Again, as she comes out of this paragraph, she relates it back to her thesis: "As can be seen in the change of the focus upon the human element, Wang Hui did not pick and choose elements from past masters and piece them together like a jigsaw puzzle; he planned them in order to make them into great works of art."

Even though several of these sentences were not as "clean" as they could be, they were vast improvements over the originals. By this point, Marianne had written five drafts; the beginning paragraphs had been revised at least five times. Each draft left the Writers' Center layered with fuchsia and turquoise revisions; a clean copy appeared for the next session. Marianne never considered the paper "finished"; each time I read through it she listened for sentences she could rewrite or clarify further. And Marianne was starting to see this willingness pay off. When she took her latest draft to the professor, to see if she was "on the right track," he reminded her she needed to footnote the sentence about "shale-like" mountains. Although at first she was angry, Marianne now laughed as she remembered the look on his face when she told him she'd written it. Marianne was proud and confident of her writing; none of the "I can't write" tone of the first conference remained.

May 8, 1990: This was our last session on the Wang Hui paper, and
by far the best one. When I finished reading one of the last paragraphs, I
didn't have to "point" her in the direction of a rough sentence—she'd already
jumped to it and was reworking it with a bright purple line. This sentence
split and regrouped, becoming her conclusion:

As can be seen in Wang Hui's rendering of Fan K'uan and Wang
Meng's paintings, he transformed them by using naturalistic and
suggested details to create impressions of depth. His style was based
on past masters, but his transformation of their styles made him a
master in the present of the Ch'ing dynasty.

In the past two sessions she'd started explaining what she wanted to do in each
paragraph; however, this was the first time she hadn't needed any "direction"
as to where or how to do it:

As you improve your ability to put down words on paper—to put
down more and worry less—you will find yourself naturally devel-
op ing the critical consciousness that leads to good revising. Not just
brute negativity: the ability to detach yourself from your own words
so you can throw away what's bad or inappropriate. But also an
imaginative critical-mindedness and the ability to look through
your words as they are and see which parts could be good and see how
the good parts could be shaped. (Elbow, Writing with Power 121)

I felt that Marianne had accomplished a similar feat. She too felt she had more
"control" and "knowledge" of the subject than she did on the Wei period
tomb art paper.

May 18, 1990: Marianne stopped by with her graded paper, proudly
showing me the professor's comment:

Your work at the Writers' Center really paid off, because this paper
is a huge improvement over your first one. It's organized much more
clearly and logically, and it's expressed with a considerably improved
sense of style. In terms of content also, this paper demonstrates a real
sensitivity for visual analysis.

For the first time in her life, she is looking forward to doing some writing this
summer—just letters, but it's a start.

October 31, 1990: I've just returned from this year's National Confer-
ence on Peer Tutoring in Writing. During many of the conversations I had
in hallways and workshops, I found myself referring again and again to the
sessions I had last year with Marianne. The progress she made was amazing.
She left behind the “thesaurus philosophy of writing”\(^2\) and began to use her “revision process as a recursive process—a process with significant recurring activities—with different levels of attention and different agenda for each cycle” (Sommers 127). Marianne’s revision was a recursive process—she returned again and again to the beginning of the paper. But she didn’t work with different agendas. She didn’t decide to look at organization one time, clarity the next, and proofreading another. Each time through she concentrated on getting out what she wanted to say in a way that I would understand it, and by extension, so would any other readers. Unlike Sommer’s cyclical revision, Marianne’s revision considered the paper as a “whole,” building her meaning on multiple levels each time she went over it with another color. Working with color allowed her to rewrite effectively. Not only did the colors make it easier for her to see the changes she made (and then the ones she made over those) but also the layers of color helped her to view the writing as a process, to realize that she was building meaning with the revisions she was making. This semester I’ve recommended that other writers try using colored pens to help them make more substantial revisions.

Yesterday I started on my recorder’s report for the conference write-up; today I’ve been revising it with a thin-line, red marking pen. It makes a smooth clear line, but it scratches the paper. I’ve found myself making superficial revisions, only changing a word or crossing out a sentence. There’s a lot of information and a one page maximum; I don’t feel it’s working. I think I’ll try printing another draft.

—later—Jokingly, I “borrowed” Jean’s green felt tip pen (she’s always taking the Writers’ Center pens with her when she leaves), and I’ve been using it to edit my recorder’s report. This pen’s more fun; I’ve drawn lines connecting sentences, scrawled questions and added more information in the margins. I’m still doing some proofreading, but I’ve filled the white spaces of the paper with comments. I feel like I’m getting closer to what I want to say, that I’m really looking at what I’ve written. With the green pen I’ve been stripping away unneeded layers, rethinking the “larger picture,” then adding the details I need to get there. The final draft doesn’t seem so far away; I should get it done today. Is this how Marianne felt when she was working on the Wang Hui paper? I’ve asked her to stop by next week and talk to me about how she uses color to revise.

**November 5, 1990:** Only just got a moment to write up my notes from the interview with Marianne. Her calm and confident approach to my questions was a welcome change from the chaos of the mid-semester paper crunch. Completely at ease, she handed me a copy of the Wang Hui paper,
then tipping her chair back, she started talking about that paper. She was not
sure why she got so motivated, but she knew exactly how much work went
into it—"two weeks straight!" Justifiably, she is proud of that work:

I built that paper, like a painting. You can't do a painting at one
sitting; if it's just whipped off you can tell. Some artists can do that,
just like some people can do a paper the night before it's due, but
some people have to work harder, and I'm one of them. I enjoyed
writing it piece by piece—it made it easier to revise. It also made
working on it more interesting.

She added, "I'd thought it through, had the gist of [what I was saying]," so
that just sitting down and telling her thoughts aloud to me helped.

When I asked her how she used the colored pens, she replied, "Each time
I did a draft I used a different color—[that] made it more interesting, a little
less confusing." Initially, when she went over the draft she had used "a black
or blue pen, which doesn't stand out." She'd make corrections and then not
see them. So she started circling her ink corrections with Crayola® pens.

In our sessions she would begin with one color; when we went over the
section again, she'd switch. "$I$ kept having to change [because I] didn't
want to get confused." As a result, her revisions and comments became layers
of color on top of the black and white printed draft. Usually she brought her
favorites, the bright, blue-green turquoise and the hot, purple-pink fuchsia.
"They're playful colors, little kid colors" and "[they] make it less serious." As
she pointed out, a felt tip pen "feels different" and "flows [more] easily" than
a regular pen. "If the pen is pissing me off, then I can't write," she explained,
it needs to flow." Working on the Wang Hui paper "wasn't so much like
writing," especially with the felt tip pens. By the same reasoning, she can't
write with pencils, since they get dull, slowing her down; she added, "you can
[also] change things too easily." Marianne believes "when you're writing, it
needs to flow down your arm and onto the page."

When I told her about my experience with the red pen, she interrupted
with "red ink is bad; [it's] teacher's corrections—I've got a bad feeling for lots
of red ink." Pointing to her Wang Hui paper, where the professor had put
delete marks on every hyphen mistake (she'd used Wang-Hui instead of
Wang Hui), she explained "he didn't need to do that; he could've said it went
throughout the paper. Or only done it a couple of times—I'm not stupid;
I can see my mistake. No need to beat it to death." What are some good
colors? She replied, "choose colors you like. The two colors I use are really
different."

Having our sessions at the table, instead of the desk, was important; she
could spread out, put the pages of the paper next to each other, and have the books with the "support [of] what [I] was trying to say" handy. As we did not face the window there were no tempting distractions. And when we worked on the paper, with our routine of reading and then stopping to talk, Marianne said she began to see what she was doing. "I had lots of interesting stuff, but it was pretty unrelated; later I learned how to cut that out." I brought up that last paragraph, when she'd spotted a problem before I did; "like that," she agreed. "For the first draft you helped me, and after that session I realized that I could do it for myself, so you [became] a guide." She added, "because we worked together, I learned." But what helped the most was "writing [down my] train of thought," referring to the lists of her points and how she used these to rewrite a problem sentence.

The lists were connected with her art history exams, where she had to describe unknown art pieces in detail (appearance, materials, composition, etc.). In a recent test, she began by describing all the physical characteristics, listing everything, relevant or not. She discovered "things will pop up": white, marble, fishlike, man or serpent, plus several other clues clicked into Bible, Christian piece, Jonah and the Whale. But she has to build up to it, just like a paper. It's difficult to "just do it," the "brain doesn't work well unless it's been warmed up." It was clear from her answer that the anxieties she expressed in March about taking essay tests had disappeared; she had developed her own strategy for "doing" these exams. Now she uses more exploratory writing, and she finds the insights she needs come out when she's concentrating on the objects and listing what she sees. Of course, listing this "train of thought on the computer" helps too.

Before the interview was over, Marianne gave her advice on writing. "Go to the Writers' Center, and plan to have [an appointment] a week or two in advance," so "you'll have a due date before the real due date." This helps to "get your butt in gear." With her own writing she's aware of her need for multiple copies, to be working on "something new each time." As she knows, writing can be painful, but it doesn't have to be. The colors not only helped her to see revision as a process, but also as an enjoyable one.

November 8, 1990: Found this great quotation by Robert Browning in the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*: "A fierce vindictive scribble of red" (100:23). It sounded appropriate; fits what Marianne said in the interview.

Before I talked to Marianne about how she used color on her drafts, I wondered if she realized that she tended to use the turquoise for larger editing concerns and the fuchsia for proofreading things. Was this a conscious system? No. She usually started working with the fuchsia, the brighter.
“more fun” color. As we got into the session, she’d switch to the turquoise to remind herself which changes were the most recent, the ones she wanted to keep. If Marianne had to go over a paragraph again in light of a later question, she’d switch back. The change in color helped her stay fresh and focused, keeping the revising fun. At the same time the colors added to the feeling of layers, the sense of building the paper. But more importantly, they gave her a sense of control over the writing—in going over the sentences with different colors she discovered that she could fine-tune her points, finally saying what she wanted to say.

Making a colorful mess, then cleaning it up and returning to the beginning of a fresh copy in the next session became her treatment of revision as a recursive process. Not only was she vertically building her ideas up from the printed page in layers of color, but she was also moving laterally, from the draft to the figures and the scrap pieces of paper with their “trains of thought.” When she left the pages and margins of her paper she was able to say what she wanted; the colors then allowed her to move those thoughts back to the paper. In the interview she felt that her listing technique for art exams was a tangent; however, it was obviously connected to her ability to “build” the Wang Hui paper. As she added the color revisions she enhanced the feeling of layers, the sense that she was “[building] that paper like a painting.” Oil painting is not painting by numbers—you can’t work on one section to the exclusion of another. You have to build the details onto the background with thought for what comes first and what comes next, always keeping in mind the whole picture as you want it to look when it is done. Although you may work on smaller sections, you are always conscious of those pieces as a larger whole. Marianne’s “piece by piece” meant “layer by layer”; it was not a reference to working on isolated paragraphs. Instead, she was describing our arrival at the latest paragraph after going once again through the earlier ones. This is a cumulative revision, not a subtractive one.

In their article “The Cognition of Discovery: Defining a Rhetorical Problem,” Linda Flower and John R. Hayes describe the results of a seven-year study which examined what abilities successful artists (and by extension, writers) employ:

In this experiment the artists were given a studio equipped with materials and a collection of objects they might draw. The successful artists, like our expert writers, explored more of the materials before them and explored them in more depth, fingering, moving, touching, rearranging, and playing with alternatives, versus moving quickly to a rather conventional arrangement and sketch. Once drawing was begun, the artists’ willingness to explore and reformu-
late the problem continued, often until the drawing was nearly completed. Similarly our successful writers continued to develop and alter their representation of the problem throughout the writing process. (101)

Marianne, too, returned to her “materials” again and again, exploring them further, re-seeing what she’d seen, and revising accordingly. I watched her do this throughout the Wang Hui paper. But was she only responding to my presence and the atmosphere of the Writers’ Center? Would she be able to do this on her own?

November 28, 1990: Marianne came in with a take-home exam on the question “Compare and contrast the Doryphorus by Polykleitus and the Discobolus by Myron,” the paper she’d told me about in the interview. Although there were fewer problems in this shorter paper than in the Wang Hui one, we seemed to be covering the same ground, still drawing out her themes, making connections and clarifying sentences. Had she made any progress? From the way she talked about her writing during the interview, I knew she was developing a critical consciousness. But I wasn’t sure if it had carried through in application. How much revision had she done on her own? Was she still working like the successful artists? After our session, I checked through her rough drafts (seven of them).

In her notes she’d blocked off her freewriting and lists in different colors, creating a code for what information belonged together. But this was just her first use of color. In the following drafts, colored corrections and comments ran all through the text. Pink, fuchsia, turquoise, and neon yellow covered one draft; Marianne said she’d gone over it several times, using a different color each time. Fuchsia still dominated, revising previous corrections and continuing to build meaning on more than one level. However, Marianne didn’t categorize her colors, designating one for sentences or another for larger editing concerns; instead, she revised on all levels with each color. Her switches from turquoise to fuchsia showed her using layers of color to build meaning on the paper as a whole. These layers allowed her to see both where she had been and where she was going. Marianne also double-spaced all her drafts, and she rewrote her sentences in any available white space, between lines, in margins, even on the back of the page. Lists of descriptive words for the statues were written in the margins or on extra pieces of notebook paper. Bright-colored numbers, letters, stars, asterisks, and arrows provided directional clues. She had made visible the underdrawing on which she built her paper.

Here was a writer continually fine-tuning her meaning, not by breaking
it down into pieces but by building it. For the most part, Marianne was writing not only what she wanted but what she needed to say in order for her essay to make sense. Even in her "final" draft, she was still willing to add, delete, and clarify. She methodically built her essay layer by layer, patiently redoing anything that wasn’t quite right. Her writing was not perfect, but, as the drafts indicated, it was improving. Clearly she has the tools she needs and she knows how to use them—the “fun” colors of turquoise, fuchsia, spring green, bubblegum pink, and blue-green cutting out words and filling white spaces with rewritten sentences and editing comments, creating the mess that is a necessary part of “saying what you mean.”

Notes

1 “Use color whenever possible. For example, to illustrate the concept of a topic sentence with support, you could watercolor the topic sentence in medium red, with lighter red for the remaining sentences in the paragraph. Or if a student often types “d” for “b,” have that student underline all “b’s” in the rough draft with a green pen, and then put a green mark on the “b” key of the keyboard.” Cheryl Hofstetter Towns, Writing Lab Strategies for the Learning Disabled Student.

2 “The students place a symbolic importance on their selection and rejection of words as the determiners of success or failure for their compositions. When revising, they primarily ask themselves: can I find a better word or phrase? A more impressive, not so clichéd, or less hum-drum word? Am I repeating the same word or phrase too often? . . . a ‘thesaurus philosophy of writing’” (Sommers 122).

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Works Cited


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