

Hedengren

CHAPTER 5

Revising

“The beautiful part of writing is that you don’t have to get it right the first time—unlike, say, a brain surgeon.”

—Robert Cromier

In this chapter you will learn

- how to encourage global revision in students’ papers.
- how to plan, manage, and conduct effective peer-review sessions.

At some point during the drafting process, students shift from drafting to revising, from simply writing down their ideas to fine-tuning what they have written. Students begin to think less about themselves (“What am I saying?”) and more about their readers (“How can I say this as clearly as possible for my audience?”).

Revising means “to see again” what has been written, to evaluate one’s writing critically for ways to make it better. With this new vision, students can see where they need to add, delete, move, or change things in their papers. This chapter discusses methods you can use to help your students revise on the global level and consider audience feedback to improve their papers.

Global Revision

A student once said, “Revision! Who has time to revise? I never revise because my papers are late as is. I mean you’re at the keyboard, you’re checking your watch, as you’re going [in] like, three minutes to class. . . . It’s like writing roulette!”¹ Indeed, many students don’t give themselves enough time for substantive revision before they turn in their papers. And even if students do allow themselves time to revise their papers, they usually make only “local” changes to words or sentences. However, most drafts need revision on the “global” level, rethinking the entire world of the piece, not just the surface problems.

Nancy Sommers, director of the Harvard Expository Writing Program, conducted research comparing the revision strategies of student writers and experienced adult writers. Table 5.1 compares student and experienced writers’ self-descriptions of their revision processes.²

As Table 5.1 shows, student writers in this study had much different ideas of revision from their more experienced counterparts. The students thought that after writing a draft they had only to make surface, or local, changes to their pa-

TABLE 5.1.
Writers’ Descriptions of Their Revision Processes

<i>Student Writers</i>	<i>Experienced Writers</i>
“I read what I have written and I cross out a word and put another word in.”	“It is a matter of looking at the kernel of what I have written, the content, and then thinking about it, responding to it, making decisions, and actually restructuring it.”
“I go over it and change words around.”	“In one draft, I might cross out three pages, write two, cross out a fourth, rewrite it, and call it a draft. I am constantly writing and rewriting. There are levels and agenda which I have to attend to in each draft.”
“I just review every word and make sure that everything is worded right.”	“Rewriting means on one level, finding the argument, and on another level, language changes to make the argument more effective.”
“The changes that I make are usually just marking out words and putting different ones in.”	“My first draft is usually very scattered. In rewriting, I find the line of argument.”
“I throw things out and say they are not good. I like to write like Fitzgerald did by inspiration, and if I feel inspired then I don’t need to slash and throw much out.”	“It means taking apart what I have written and putting it back together again. I ask major theoretical questions of my ideas, respond to those questions, and think of proportion and structure.”

pers—to “clean them up.” Essentially, they were moving from drafting directly to editing, skipping the revising step of the writing process altogether. The experienced writers, in contrast, saw their drafts as opportunities to reconsider what they were saying and then to find ways to say that more clearly, taking full advantage of the revising step.

Rather than just changing words and sentences, global revision involves fundamental alterations, such as *adding* information, *deleting* unnecessary paragraphs or sentences, *changing* the overall structure, or *moving* sentences, paragraphs, or sections to more appropriate locations. Sometimes at the revising step writers will discover that what they have written is not what they wanted to say after all and decide to start over.

As a TA you can encourage your students to look at their drafts globally, to look critically at their objectives or thesis statements, topic sentences, evidence, overall structure, and paragraphing before they move on to the local level of checking spelling and so forth (in the editing step). You can do this by reading their drafts and commenting on the global issues, either in writing or in one-on-

one meetings during your office hours. (Chapters 8, 10, and 11 provide more detailed information on doing this effectively.) But you can also, with your professor's approval and cooperation, give the students opportunities to respond to each other's drafts in peer-review groups.

Peer-Review Groups

Peer-review groups are a good way to give students another "view" of their writing so that they can revise their papers more effectively. Such peer-review sessions can be very effective for a number of reasons.

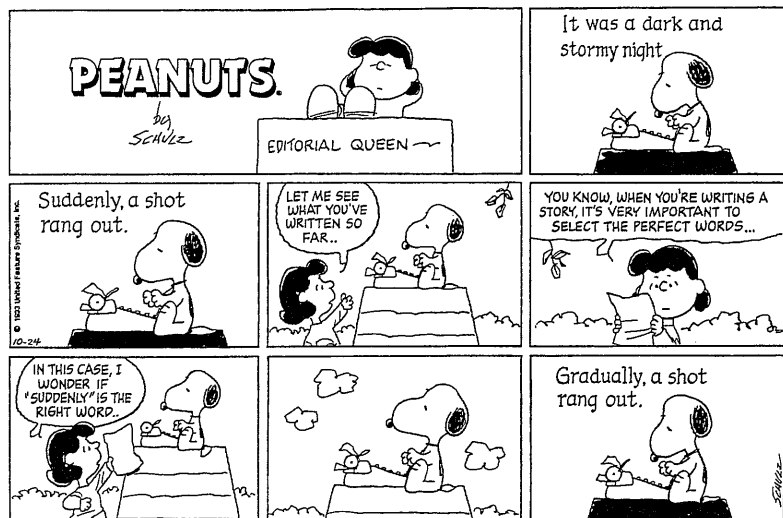
- The students reviewing the writing are in the same class and are working on the same assignment. They know the requirements of the assignment and the professor's expectations.
- The students have tried to write the paper themselves and are aware of the difficulties inherent to the assignment.
- Just by reading other people's drafts, the students will come to a better understanding of what is required of them to fulfill the assignment.

But problems are inherent in this situation, too. As the Peanuts cartoon below indicates, it is not easy to give feedback that leads to good revision.

Lucy gives Snoopy what seems to be a thoughtful response and is careful not to take over the author's responsibility. However, she doesn't explain what she means; Snoopy does what she says without thinking for himself, and his revision is much worse than his draft.

The following is a list of things that could go wrong in peer-review sessions.

- **"No. Give me your pen—I'll take care of it."** A "know-it-all" student might try to take over the paper, changing everything and taking away the authority of the writer.



- **"It's a good paper. I—uh—really like it."** A sensitive student might worry about hurting someone's feelings and hesitate to say anything the least bit critical.
- **"You should have only two spaces here."** Some reviewers may insist on focusing on local-level errors rather than more global issues of focus, structure, and content.
- **"Oh. Okay . . . I'll make that change right now!"** An insecure writer will implement suggested changes without considering whether they will really work for his or her paper.
- **"Where did you go for spring break last year?"** Distracted students may find it easier to talk about anything other than the papers at hand.

If you and your professor choose to use peer-review groups, you can do some important things to maximize the advantages while minimizing the disadvantages. Students will give more helpful feedback to each other if you and your professor prepare them well by providing clear guidelines, planning and managing the process carefully, and holding students accountable for careful preparation and participation.

Teaching Tip: Listening Skills

Sometimes students may need more direct instruction in truly "listening" to what a student is saying in a paper. Karen Spear, a professor of English who has published extensively on peer review, offers the following ideas for teaching specific listening in a classroom.³

- **Attending.** Peer reviewers need to pay attention to what is said (or written). Practice this skill through pair shares, requiring that one of the pair simply listen to the other for five or ten minutes. This keeps students from focusing on what they will say next rather than on what their partner is saying. (See p. 31 for more information on pair shares.)
- **Reflecting.** Reviewers learn to say back to writers what they think has been said. Then writers can see if they have communicated what they wanted to. You can have class exercises in paraphrasing what another person has said.
- **Connecting.** Reviewers should be able to summarize the main ideas of the paper and make connections between the various ideas. You can practice these skills in class if you stop a discussion once in a while and ask a student to summarize what has been said or compare what student A said to the comments of student B.

PROVIDE GUIDELINES

General guidelines such as the following should guide all peer-review sessions.

- **The author is in charge.** No one can take responsibility for the paper away from the author. The author solicits feedback and guides the dis-

cussion of his or her paper, and the author makes final decisions about how to revise it. Tell the students that the author must initiate the discussion of his or her paper.

- **This draft is a work in progress.** Everyone must understand that the draft under consideration is not finished. The author knows that the draft needs revision. He or she is looking for help in making decisions about changes to make. Most students are very nervous at first about sharing their writing. The first time we do peer review, I usually have the whole class recite in unison, “This is a really lousy draft.” After making this group admission, everyone laughs in relief and we can get on with the review.
- **Be both supportive and challenging.** Suggest that each discussion of a paper begin with specific positive feedback (“The support in paragraph 7 is terrific. I’m convinced.”). Then the group should move on to specific challenging comments and questions (“I don’t understand the connection between parts 2 and 3. What kind of a transition would make that connection clear to the reader?”).
- **Be specific.** Neither supporting nor challenging feedback is helpful unless it is very specifically worded. Teach students to point to specific places in the paper rather than discussing the paper as a whole.

For each peer-review session, the professor and you could provide a list of questions to help guide students’ discussions on each others’ drafts and further highlight the expectations for the writing assignment itself. Example 5.1 features a peer-review form for a geology term paper. Example 5.2 features a peer-review form for an international nutrition report.

EXAMPLE 5.1. Peer-Review Form for a Geology Term Paper¹

GEOL 111—PEER-REVIEW FORM	
Title of paper: _____	
Author of paper: _____	
Peer reviewer: _____	
1. Is the title of the paper appropriate?	
2. To what extent has the stated purpose been met?	
3. Are the basic data presented clearly and in a logical form?	

¹Thanks to Eric Christiansen, Department of Geology, Brigham Young University (BYU).

4. Are the illustrations clear, relevant, and well prepared? Are additional illustrations needed?
5. Are the facts separated clearly from the interpretations?
6. Is the paper well organized?
7. Is the paper written clearly?
8. Are the conclusions supported by the data presented? (Most important)
9. Are all the references cited in the text included in the References Cited section at the end of the paper?

EXAMPLE 5.2. Peer-Review Form for an International Nutrition Reportⁱⁱ

NDFS 380—PEER-REVIEW FORM		
<p>Use this form to evaluate the technical reports of your peers from the task force. The general secretary will be using the same criteria to evaluate the final versions of the reports and proposals. In your comments address what was well done, anything that was unclear or inadequately supported, and suggestions for improvement.</p> <p>5 – Excellent 4 – Good 3 – Adequate 2 – Needs improvement 1 – Poor or not present</p>		
Criterion	Rating	Comments
Technical accuracy		
Main ideas clearly stated		

(continued)

ⁱⁱThanks to Alison Lemon, Department of Nutrition, Dietetics, and Food Science, BYU.

EXAMPLE 5.2. (continued)

Criterion	Rating	Comments
Arguments and proposals logically and adequately supported		
Questions answered and/or format followed		
Citations and references correct, appropriate, and accurate		
Grammar, spelling, and punctuation correct		
Professional presentation (title, format, language, tone)		
Other comments:		

PLAN AND MANAGE THE PROCESS

To be effective, the peer-review process needs to be carefully planned and managed. Together with your professor, consider the assignment, the students, and the time available as you consider the following questions.

- **Should the peer review be oral, written, or online?** Oral reviews are collaborative and give authors and reviewers the opportunity to discuss possible revisions and try out ideas informally. Written reviews allow the reviewers to think carefully about their reactions to the piece and explain their suggestions more thoroughly. Online reviews are written reviews that take place on a class Web site or through email. (See the Technology Tactics box on p. 55.)
- **Should the review take place in class or out of class?** For out-of-class peer review, the students can exchange drafts, respond to them carefully at home, and then return reviewed papers in class. The students could also meet in groups outside of class to discuss their papers, or they could exchange reviews via email. (See the Technology Tactics box on p. 55.)

- **How large should the review groups be?** Groups of three are small enough to allow time to discuss all the papers in a single in-class review session. Also, students get to read more than one draft and get feedback from more than one reviewer. Being able to make comparisons among drafts helps students see what works and what doesn't. If the number of students isn't divisible by three, have one group of four or two groups of two.
- **Should the groups be assigned or self-selected?** There are advantages to both methods. Assigned groups can be arranged so that at least one strong writer is in each group. Self-selected groups usually feel comfortable working together.
- **When should I explain procedures?** However you assign groups, be sure to give all necessary direction *before* dividing up the class. Once students form their groups, they begin to talk and won't hear the rest of your instructions.
- **When is the best time to hold a peer-review session?** Arrange to hold peer-review sessions when students have had time to write a good draft and when there is still time for substantive revision, perhaps after students complete their "quick and dirty" drafts. (See the Teaching Tip box on p. 37.)

Technology Tactics

If you have a class Web site, you can set up online peer-review groups to encourage revision. Students can post their papers to the class's site, select and download a paper to review, and then repost the commented-on paper.

Pamela Flash and Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch of the University of Minnesota researched the advantages and disadvantages of "virtual peer response." Their findings are summarized here.⁴

Advantages of Virtual Peer Response	Disadvantages of Virtual Peer Response
The activity is an exercise in writing rather than speaking, thus encouraging writing practice.	Loss of face-to-face interaction; perhaps less interpersonal interaction in short-term projects.
Students may spend more time reflecting on comments they give to peers, knowing that their comments will be recorded.	Delayed feedback may frustrate some who want immediate feedback.
Students may offer more comments about the global aspect of writing.	Possibly students may offer less feedback on local issues such as grammar or mechanics.
Students may continue their online discussion of writing outside of class because of the convenience.	Student access to technology outside of class may vary.

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<i>Technology Tactics (continued)</i>	
Advantages of Virtual Peer Response	Disadvantages of Virtual Peer Response
Students gain exposure to a variety of communication technologies: word processing, email, groupware tools.	Problems with technology (loss of documents, failed attachments) may discourage students.

HOLD STUDENTS ACCOUNTABLE

Students will take the peer-review process seriously if you demonstrate clearly that *you* take it seriously. The following are some suggestions for holding students accountable for their drafts and their contribution to the peer-review process.

- **Require good drafts.** Check students' drafts quickly to make sure they are serious efforts worth subjecting to peer review.
- **Give points.** Reward students for having good drafts and participating constructively in the peer-review session.
- **Move around the room.** If the peer review is held during class, circulate around the room, listen in, answer questions, and keep students on schedule. (This is a good time to check students' drafts and give points.)
- **Reinforce good comments.** Jot down good, constructive comments you hear. After the review session, read these comments back to the class to model the type of feedback students should be giving each other.
- **Assign grades.** Evaluate formal written peer-review comments according to pre-specified criteria.

Conclusion

John Updike said, "Writing and rewriting are a constant search for what it is one is saying."⁵ Experienced writers realize that global revision is necessary even after a draft has been written. They depend on the responses of others to know if what they have written is saying what they want it to. As a TA, you can help your students understand the importance of global revision by requiring drafts to be written early enough that there is time for revision. You can also train students to give good peer review to each other's papers. Then your students will come to understand the satisfaction of revising their work. Ellen Goodman, the Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist, explains this satisfaction. "What makes me happy is rewriting. In the first draft, you get your ideas and your theme clear. But the next time through, it's like cleaning house, getting rid of all the junk, getting things in the right order, tightening things up. I like the process of making writing neat."⁶

Chapter Checklist

- Revision means to "see again," to look at the draft with a fresh perspective and find ways to make your message clearer to those who read it.
- Student writers need to understand the necessity for global revision, large-scale changes of meaning, structure, and support. These more fundamental areas need to be strengthened before moving on to sentence-level editing.
- Peer-review groups, if well planned and managed, can teach students to see writing more objectively and to have a better understanding of the craft of good writing.

Applications to Your Own Situation

1. How has revision helped you to rethink what you are saying in a piece of writing? What strategies did you use to "re-see" the piece of writing from the perspective of the reader?
2. Remember a time you participated in a peer-review group. What was helpful about the review? What was not? How could the experience have been managed so that the review would have been more productive?
3. Would a peer-review experience be useful in the class you TA? Following the suggestions on pp. 51–52, make a plan for providing an effective peer-review session in your classroom.

Working with Your Professor

1. Discuss with your professor ways to encourage substantive revision of drafts.
2. Consider with your professor the possibility of using peer-review groups to give the students feedback on their writing. If you completed Application 3, share with your professor ideas for implementing your plan.