Rebecca Lorimer and Rebecca Schoenike Nowacek
Writing Across the Curriculum

TEACHING REVISION

Revision, revision, revision: the term is nearly a mantra in Comm-B and Writing-Intensive (WI) courses. Indeed, the university criteria for Comm-B and Writing-Intensive courses *mandate* that instructors build the revision process into their courses—and for good reason. Research has consistently shown that the best, most experienced writers regularly revise their writing in substantive ways.

Why spend time teaching students how to revise their writing?

Benefits for students:

- Students' writing, as well as their understanding of content, improves from sustained thinking over time.
- Students can experiment and take chances with low-stakes writing early on in a revision process and engage more comfortably in high-stakes writing when a paper is due.
- Students practice their academic and professional planning skills.

Benefits for you:

- You can evaluate how well students understand course concepts by watching how they teach each other during revision activities.
- You might better leverage your time by receiving quality work that actually takes less time to evaluate.

Why do students resist revision?

Even when they recognize these benefits, one of the most common laments we hear from Comm-B and WI instructors is that they can't get their students to undertake substantial revisions from one draft to the next. It is surely true that some students choose not to revise because it is *demanding work*. But there may be other reasons as well.

Some students may not meet our expectations for revision because they *understand the term very differently* than we do. When Nancy Sommers, a researcher at Harvard, asked student writers and professional authors what "revision" meant to them, they gave her wildly divergent answers:

> "…just using better words and eliminating words that are not needed. I go over and change words around."
> "…cleaning up the paper and crossing out. It is looking at something and saying, no that has to go, or no, that is not
> right."
> "…on one level, finding the argument, and on another level, language changes to make the argument more effective."
> "…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."

Whereas the students described revision as a process of making adjustments at a more superficial level ("just using better words" and "cleaning up"), the professional authors described revision as a process of making fundamental changes to a paper ("finding the argument" and "actually restructuring"). Instructors of Comm-B and WI courses, no doubt, have the latter definitions in mind. But when students and instructors understand the term revision so differently, it is no surprise that many students don't undertake the kinds of revisions instructors have in mind.

Students may be willing to revise and may comprehend the kinds of revision that their instructors have in mind, but still make only superficial corrections to their drafts because they *lack specific strategies* to help them successfully undertake more fundamental revisions. With these possible explanations in mind, we offer the following suggestions—based on our own experiences and our conversations with instructors across the campus—for encouraging and teaching students to revise.

Make clear what you mean by "revision."

- Be explicit about your definition of revision. Write your definition in your syllabus and discuss it in class with students. One definition we particularly like: "True revision involves reseeing, rethinking, and reshaping the piece, resolving a tension between what we intended to say and what the discourse actually says" (Erika Lindemann, *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*).
- Model for students what you have in mind by sharing a before-and-after example of a revised paper; some instructors give examples from previous students, others share examples of revisions undertaken by famous authors.
- Consider sharing a piece of your own drafts and revised writing.

Address the common belief that good writing comes naturally and does not need to be revised.

- Have your class read Donald Murray's short piece, "The Art of Revision," or an excerpt from Anne Lamott's book *Bird by Bird*, which discusses the author's struggles with revision and the value of extremely rough drafts.

Focus your comments on the revisions that will be most beneficial.

Faced with lots of commentary on a draft, some students miss the big points or are simply too overwhelmed to engage in revision at all.

- In your conferences or in written comments, set priorities. Although a paper could be improved in many ways, you might set one or two "main goals" for revision.
- Try to make sure your marginal comments reflect those priorities. If 70% of the marks students see on a page are grammar-related and they find only one comment in the endnote advising them to restructure the organization, they may well assume that grammatical revisions are the most pressing revisions.

Avoid abstract terms when giving feedback.

Just as you need to establish with your students a common understanding of the term "revision," you will need to establish common understandings of other terms you use to define what needs to be revised—including "flow," "analysis," and "thesis."

- Plan activities in class that allow students to apply your criteria. Pass out your criteria or grading rubric before the assignment is due and ask students to use the criteria to evaluate a sample essay.
- Have students spend time generating their own criteria for the assignment. Ask them to finish the sentence starter "I will succeed in this assignment by writing a paper that is…" It's surprising how close to your own criteria students often come.

Provide your students with specific strategies and models.

You can also help students begin to revise by being concrete about how to revise and showing them step-by-step what revision looks like.

- Model a topic sentence, explain exactly what is "awkward" about a sentence, or write out a more effective transition and explain what makes it so. Often such explanations are more easily and efficiently conveyed in one-on-one conferences.
- Practice reverse outlining in class—a strategy particularly useful for organizational revision. (A detailed explanation of reverse outlining can be found in this sourcebook.) Outline a draft for students first and then have them work on another classmate's draft.
- Lead a whole-class workshop of a model paper. Pass out a sample that is very successful, needs revision, or exhibits a particular quality you want to discuss. Give students time to write marginal or endnotes and then discuss it as a class.

Motivate students to revise.

- Acknowledge how difficult—even discouraging—the revision process can be.
- When commenting on drafts, point out what is good in students' work, so that students can learn not only from other people's model work, but also from what they themselves have already successfully done. For example, if a student regularly neglects to analyze his evidence, praise the one instance where he does and point out how it strengthens the paper. Then urge the student to revise other sections of the paper based on that positive example.
- Consider adopting and making explicit the following policy: although revision will not automatically improve a grade, students who undertake a major revision (even an unsuccessful one) will not be penalized. Some instructors grade drafts and the improvements on those drafts as a way to motivate students.
- Many students are also motivated to revise when they sense a genuine interest on the part of the instructor: interest in their ideas, arguments, research—and in their progress as writers.

Make sure there is adequate time for the hard work of revision.

- Build the revision process into your syllabus; for examples of how to pace drafts and revision throughout the semester see the syllabi in the "Sequencing Assignments" section of this book.
- Consider using a final portfolio to grade students. (See examples in this sourcebook.)

Encourage / require students to get feedback on drafts from multiple sources. Sometimes hearing similar responses from various sources can confirm for students the need to revise. Other times, one respondent can explain a point of confusion in a way that suddenly makes sense. There are many possible sources of feedback: student-teacher conferences, peer groups, the Writing Center, a Writing Fellow, and even student-writers themselves. You may, however, want to talk with your students about what to do if they get contradictory advice about revising.