
Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers

(Selected excerpts from complete article)

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Revision Strategies of Student Writers

1 Most of the students I studied did not use the terms revision or rewriting. In fact, they did not seem comfortable using the word revision and explained that revision was not a word they used, but the word their teachers used. Instead, most of the students had developed various functional terms to describe the type of changes they made. The following are samples of these definitions:

2 *Scratch out and do over again:* “I say scratch out and do over, and that means what it says. Scratching out and cutting out. I read what I have written and I cross out a word and put another word in; a more decent word or a better word. Then if there is somewhere to use a sentence that I have crossed out, I will put it there.”

3 *Reviewing:* “Reviewing means just using better words and eliminating words that are not needed. I go over and change my words around.”

4 *Reviewing.* “I just review every word and make sure that everything is worded right. I see if I am rambling; I see if I can put a better word in or leave one out. Usually when I read what I have written, I say to myself, ‘that word is so bland or trite,’ and then I go and get my thesaurus.”

5 *Redoing:* “Redoing means 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.”

6 *Marking out:* “I don’t use the word rewriting because I only write one draft and the changes that I make are made on top of the draft. The changes that I make are usually just marking out words and putting different ones in.”

7 *Slashing and Throwing Out:* “I throw things out and say that 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.”

8 The students understand the revision process as a rewording activity. They do so because they perceive words as the unit of written discourse. That is, they concentrate on particular words apart from their role in the text.... The aim of revision according to the students’ own description is therefore to clean up speech; the redundancy of speech is unnecessary in writing, their logic suggests, because writing, unlike speech, can be reread....

9 The students place a symbolic importance on their selection and rejection of words as the determiners of success or failure for their compositions.... What is revealed in the students’ use of the thesaurus is the governing attitude toward their

writing: that the meaning to be communicated is already there, already finished, already produced, ready to be communicated, and all that is necessary is a better word “rightly worded.”

10 The students list repetition as one of the elements they most worry about. Attention to repetitious words is a manner of cleaning up speech. What is curious, however, is that students are aware of lexical repetition, but not conceptual repetition. Because students do not see revision as an activity in which they modify and develop perspectives and ideas, they feel that if they know what they want to say, then there is little reason for making revisions.

Revision Strategies of Experienced Writers

11 One aim of my research has been to contrast how student writers define revision with how a group of experienced writers define their own revision processes. Here is a sampling of the definitions from the experienced writers:

12 *Rewriting:* “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.”

13 *Rewriting:* “I rewrite as I write. It is hard to tell what is a first draft because it is not determined by time. 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. I can only conceptualize so much in my first draft – only so much information can be held in my head at one time; my rewriting efforts are a reflection of how much information I can encompass at one time. There are levels and agenda which I have to attend to in each draft.”

14 *Rewriting:* “Rewriting means on one level, finding the argument, and on another level, language changes to make the argument more effective. Most of the time I feel as if I can go on rewriting forever. There is always one part of a piece that I could keep working on. It is always difficult to know at what point to abandon a piece of writing. I like this idea that a piece of writing is never finished, just abandoned.”

15 *Rewriting:* “My first draft is usually very scattered. In rewriting, I find the line of argument. After the argument is resolved, I am much more interested in word choice and phrasing.”

16 *Revising:* “My cardinal rule in revising is never to fall in love with what I have written in a first or second draft. An idea, sentence, or even a phrase that looks catchy, I don’t trust. Part of this idea is to wait a while. I am much more in love with something after I have written it than I am a day or two later. It is much easier to change anything with time.”

17 *Revising:* “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, and try to find a controlling

metaphor. I find out which ideas can be developed and which should be dropped. I am constantly chiseling and changing as I revise.”

18 The experienced writers describe their primary objective when revising as finding the form or shape of their argument. Thus, the experienced writers say their drafts are ‘not determined by time,’ that rewriting is a ‘constant process,’ that they feel as if (they) ‘can go on forever.’ Revising confuses the beginning and end, the agent and vehicle; it confuses, in order to find, the line of argument.

19 After a concern for form, the experienced writers have a second objective: a concern for their readership. The experienced writers imagine a reader (reader of their product) whose existence and whose expectations influence their revision process.

1. In your own words, describe the major difference(s) between how student writers and experienced writers understand revision.
2. Sommers says that students notice lexical rather than conceptual repetition? What does she mean? Do you agree with her?
3. Why do you think Nancy Sommers wanted to study the differences between student writers and more experienced writers? How does reading about this study help you as a writer?