

Any new approach, any new way of seeing the world or one's work, is what we're after. That's the hallmark of creation, after all. If we only teach our certainties, then we might as well just record our lofty thoughts and prescriptions and hit "play" at the beginning of the term. —Robin

Introduction

Often one of the hardest things to do in writing is to look back at a work and find ways to take a different approach to it. It is important that we fix our errors and spruce up the details of sentences and mechanical issues; however, getting to true revision, the point where you really re-see your work in a clearer, more crystallized way, is tough but primary.

Alan Ziegler notes in *The Writing Workshop* that looking back on previously published pieces of writing is often difficult; "faults jump out . . . awkward sentences demand to be reshaped, a word looks embarrassingly out of place . . . an image falls flat, or a hole exists which I could now fix easily." "But," he continues, "it is these very errors that serve as indications that I have become a better writer."

The Writing Task

For this assignment, you will write *an essay about* what you'd change in *one* of the [format assignments](#) we wrote in the course, as well as ways you'd capitalize on your successes there. In short, you will analyze your own writing and work to identify places and ways you can strengthen it even more. *Do not revise the essay. Instead, analyze it and discuss what you would do if you were going to revise.*

I expect you to quote from your original essay, point out specific paragraphs or sections, and talk about how the quote or section it represents works now, as well as how the changes you suggest making will improve it. I also expect to see analysis and discussion of moments that work well. How do they contribute to the strengths of the essay? Could you extend them or use the techniques elsewhere?

Remember, this too, should be a well-developed essay. It must discuss these things:

- What strengths does your essay have?
- What is a specific example of that?
- Why is it a strength, how does it add to the essay, or how could it be used elsewhere in the essay?

- What improvements can be made to your essay?
- What is a specific example of that?
- Why does it need improvement?
- How might it be strengthened? Discuss and give a specific example.
- How will that improve it?

Please note that I don't have permission to openly distribute these models. You need to return these to me when we meet in class.

Notes:

- You are doing this in a very limited period. It requires that you focus and narrow things down, and put the skills we've been working on to use.
- The first two sample essays *almost* accomplish the goals. They discuss specific points, but don't give examples of how to fix them. They are also light on discussing strengths and backing those up with specific examples and discussion.
- The final essays, clearly hit all the requirements of the assignment.
- This essay is really between you and me; you don't need to retell or summarize your essay. I'll remember it.
- You can choose to write this in the style (adding the needed details) of the first two: more analytically, or in the style of the final essays: more familiar and narrative.
- Format your paper in MLA style.

What I'd like to Revise in my "Sunny Day" Essay

In my last assignment, I attempted to capture my own enjoyment of warm winter days and communicate it to the reader. What I'm not sure I did, is to convince the reader that a sunny day really is of great value. The examples I chose were concrete events that I thought conveyed how sunny warm days allowed for enjoyable activities. But I think I failed to fully discuss the feelings that these days engender, therefore weakening my argument.

Dwelling upon what feelings sunny days evoked for me is only one of many ways I could improve this essay. In general, I think I need to apply deeper analysis to all elements of the work. The simplicity of this essay is most evident when I state my thesis in the second paragraph: "A sunny day, amidst plenty of stormy ones, is as valuable as an oasis in a parched desert." The sentence itself is not faulty, but as a thesis statement, it lacks depth. It's veiled in a catchy analogy, but on its own really only states that a sunny day is very valuable. To add more interest to the essay, I think I might strive for more complexity in my thesis. For example, in which less superficial, less obvious ways does the presence of sunshine uplift and enhance the experience of a day?

In my attempts to flesh-out a rather simplex essay, I tend to resort to lots and lots of description. Description does add interest, but too many descriptive passages give the essay the appearance of a short story, or it may even become too poetic. For instance, my opening paragraph consists entirely of description and metaphors, "In the thick of dreary winter, my house seems to shudder whenever the clouds purge the icy cold rain they've harbored in their gray masses." I might instead begin with some description and then elaborate more on my thesis statement.

On a more mechanical, grammatical level, many of the sentences in this essay were too lengthy. I tend to pack lots of information into one sentence, causing many to become borderline run-ons. My reluctance to split up long sentences leaves my writing a little awkward sounding at times. One such sentence follows: "I had never been to the Bay Area without the protection of at least a sweater, but as we walked along Fisherman's Wharf, waiting for my dad to join us from his convention, not even the slightest breeze chilled our bare shoulders." This

can obviously be remedied simply through creating two new sentences.

One of the most glaring faults of my essay was the conclusion. In my haste to wrap up another assignment, I whipped up one of the most general, cliché, boring, summary paragraphs I've ever composed. Without much thought, I compacted the content of my entire essay into a few very overused phrases that seemed to sum up and restate a very elementary thesis. "Sun seems to have a positive effect on everyone, making us all find the silver lining in daily events." The result was utterly dull and predictable. I might have written, in place of this "rehash paragraph," something refreshing—perhaps I could have used something to *represent* my thesis message, instead of very obviously restating it.

In a revision of this "sunny day" essay, I might focus on presenting my arguments with more personal and emotional evidence. While occurrences made for clear and communicative examples, supporting evidence that expressed my own feelings might further convince the reader of sunlight's value. Moreover, I might use more analytical techniques to portray these feelings, so my content would show through, rather than being disguised by heavy description and overly elegant wording.

Adding Some Details

Every essay needs revised. My second assignment essay needs a few major revisions to make it better. First of all, the assignment was focused on adding detail to my descriptions. While I added some detail, my descriptions could have used a lot more. I also could have talked about a smaller portion of my experience. For instance, instead of describing the whole situation from the beginning to the end, I probably should have focused more on the exact moment when the injury occurred. Other than that, my essay could have used a few technical changes, but the main problem was the lack of detail in my descriptions.

My introductory paragraph was good and provides an overview of the rest of the essay. One sentence stands out, though, "I remember all the details vividly from that experience." After reading the essay all the way through once, as a reader, I am still searching for those details that are so vividly remembered. I do not describe the weather at all, even though it was winter, and the snow should have provided a good opportunity for me to include some details. These details about the weather would have fit nicely in the second paragraph. This second paragraph should also include an overview of the situation.

My next two paragraphs focus on the rides my friend and I took on the hill. I described the rocky hill, the speed of the sled, and the way we rode down the hill, but I did not successfully describe my feelings during this experience. I said, "We must have been going twice as fast, and we flew off of one of the jumps!" This is a decent description of the actual situation, but descriptions of my feelings would have helped to give the reader a more complete sense of what was going on.

Other than the lack of detail, there are a few technical things which stand out. First, there is one sentence which says, "It sure felt weird." This is not a particularly effective sentence in my essay. Obviously, it would be a weird feeling looking at your knee and seeing a gaping hole and blood, but I should have described this better. I also focused a lot on the lessons I learned from the scar. This is good, but when I revise, I should clean this up to make the essay stronger.

After reading my essay and looking for areas to improve, the main thing that came across to me was the detail. The assignment was set up to improve my descriptions, and I did

not completely fulfill this assignment. Improving my descriptions will greatly improve my essay. The other revision that would help make the essay better would be to improve my sentences and other mechanical issues. This was not a major problem in my essay, but it would certainly help.

Discovering Revision

I've never liked revising. I usually like exactly what I've written the first time around, and besides a few spelling or grammatical errors, not very much gets changed in my essays. Oh, sure, once in a while I can find a way to make something make a little more sense (like I could do with that sentence), but I'd rather not. "Raw" writing intrigues me more than a finished, polished product, even though I know it's the polished-ness that people want. I've never really worked for other people. But this essay called for something different. It called for a thorough revision of something. Careful thought about my already satisfactory writing, thought on what could be better and how to make it better. Am I capable of this? Me, Miss Anti-Revision? Well, things you don't expect happen every day, so I decided to give it a go.

Reading through my essay I first noticed that I used a decent amount of description. And I also noticed I could've elaborated on most of it. "...the day where we got to hold koalas..." doesn't exactly mean much to anyone who wasn't on the trip with me. Why did we get to hold koalas? Why was that so exciting? And, come to think of it, who were "we"? Reading through my essay I noted this was a real trouble spot. I had referred to things that were completely obvious to me, but to the "naïve but interested reader" confusing and un-descript.

So what could I do? Go back and write my second paragraph *all over again*? Some things just have to be done, I suppose. Here it goes:

I can still remember the day I first saw the necklace with crystal clarity. The day was one of the pinnacles of the trip, and every other teenager on the adventure with me was just as excited as I was. This was the day we not only got to feed kangaroos and watch a boomerang throwing demonstration; this was the day we got to hold koalas. And, not only did we get to hold koalas, we got to have a picture of us with the koala e-mailed to our homes half the globe away. To put it mildly we were ecstatic, and none of us could wait for the moment of total koala-bliss. I decided to pass the time I spent waiting for my turn in the gift shop, trying to turn my energies and thoughts to something besides holding koalas.

I liked that a little better. A bit more explanatory and clear, especially when it came to explaining what exactly we were doing holding koalas. Also, as I read through my original I couldn't believe how many synonyms I had used for 'koala'. "Friendly ball of fuzz"? What was I

thinking?

I said before I had used a decent amount of description, and I also said I could've elaborated on it. A "...koala charm...carved out of shiny, iridescent mother of pearl and hung on a thin silver chain." could be many things, depending on whom you're talking to. I decided to elaborate my description, but not in my third paragraph, except to add the word "small" in before "koala".

I thought the larger elaboration would fit better in my fourth paragraph, after my first sentence, "Now I can't really imagine myself without that necklace." I'm adding in this, "Every time I look in the mirror it looks back at me, a little smiling koala the size of two peas and as cute as a button." I also changed the first sentence of my last paragraph, from "Though the paint on the koala's eyes and nose is long gone, and it has been joined by a charm of 16th notes, its still the same necklace bought on the best adventure of my life," to "Even though the black paint on the koala's eyes and nose is long gone, and it constantly gets tangled with all of my other necklaces, it still stands out as the necklace bought on the best adventure of my life."

"What else is there to fix?" I found myself almost eagerly thinking. Then I realized what I was doing: I was turning into a revision freak. Why me? The immense task of re-reading, re-thinking, and re-writing an essay was not supposed to be *fun*. I decided it must just be the spirit of the evening, who wouldn't be happy after doing their Shakespeare homework?

I noticed I jumped around a little in my essay. My transitions weren't always the smoothest, but I liked them that way. Is that anti-revision showing its face? No, I like jumpy styles in everything. When scenes randomly pop up in movies, and chapters seem to come out of nowhere in books, that's when I'm hooked. Though my essay isn't completely random, it's the way I like it, and isn't that the best way?

After reading through my essay again I decided there was only one thing left that I really didn't like, and that was the closing sentence of my fourth paragraph, "It's just a bank full of everything." That sentence doesn't really sound like it belongs. It also doesn't sound like a good close for that paragraph or lead in to the next paragraph. I decided to change it to something a little bit more descriptive, "It's a photo album filled with not just pictures, but moments of my life, moments that are the most special to me." That sounds much better.

Am I done already? That wasn't so bad. As I write these final sentences on my essay

about revision I wonder if I'll have time to revise this. I decide that I'll make time. Revision isn't really evil, and though I wouldn't call it benign, it's closer to fun than I thought. I like my essay better now, I enjoyed having another chance to work on my essay, and the work I put into it now reflects even more than it did before. Best of all, my essay is now something I can be even more proud of.

Revision Essay

Whenever I write, it seems like I do most of the work of revising from the start. It takes me such a long time to write a single paragraph, or choose a single word, that by the time I'm finished there are very few grammatical or organizational mistakes. I scrutinize everything, and one of my favorite parts of having people read my writing is that they point out things I should change that I had never noticed, even though I'd gone over those exact words seemingly millions of times. One strength I have when it comes to revising is that I really don't mind having my writing critiqued and criticized; at first it was hard to accept other peoples' opinions, but I've come to realize that if I'm proud of what I write, even the most negative comments won't change that fact. I've learned how to use critiques to my advantage; knowing what other people think of my writing gives me different perspectives and ideas.

It still is really hard sometimes for me to let go of words or sentences that end up not working. Like in the last paragraph of my essay, "Writing to Annie," you said the last sentence was kind of cliché and that I needed to remember to show and not tell. I wrote: "It was the first time I ever pulled emotions out of my heart and set them to paper, and I believe it was the beginning of my life as a true writer." Originally I had loved that sentence! I thought it was perfect—a good, strong ending that summed up everything I had wanted to express throughout the essay. But I didn't realize that the entire point of writing the essay was so I didn't *need* that sentence at the end; I was supposed to be able to convey that idea without one clear, concise sentence—showing, not telling. I took the easy way out without even trying to.

Looking back now, it really does seem kind of sappy and cliché. It's the type of thing parents or judges of an essay contest would probably love—people who aren't necessarily looking for flaws other than technicalities. They might not like my revised sentence as much because it requires more thinking and doesn't set everything out in the open. But for the sake of improving my writing I attempted to change it, and even though I was critical of it at first, now I think I actually like it more than the original sentence. "I was disappointed that I couldn't find my exact words, but I still remember clearly the gist of what it said. Pulling emotions out of my heart and setting them to paper created honest and sincere letters to my beloved lost dog—but in the end they were actually much more." Although it still might need even more revising, I think it's a lot better than what I had at first.

That was the major change I made to my essay. Pretty much everything else was just cut and paste, one word deleting, and starting new paragraphs. For instance, in two spots I started paragraphs in different places to put emphasis on certain parts of my essay. I moved “Finally my fingers touched the keys, tentatively at first, slowly spelling out the words” to the end of the paragraph before it so that the beginning of my letter to Annie could start the next paragraph. That definitely made a strong impact on the start of the paragraph and was a really good idea.

I’m glad the organization of my paragraphs was originally good. Sometimes it’s hard for me to tell if the transitions between ideas and paragraphs are smooth or not, so I was glad to hear that they worked out. I was happy with the way I was able to begin by showing what was happening—me sitting at the computer—to talking about how I had always loved writing. When I first started writing the essay I had no idea I was going to delve into my past as a writer, describing my first writing experiences in kindergarten and detailing how I found my personal writing style. It occurred to me as I was writing the essay. When I was finished, I wasn’t sure if it really fit in with everything else, or if it was too off the subject. I was relieved that you thought it fit right in.

In everything I write I like to make sure I have plenty of figurative language and alliteration so that no matter how persuasive I’m trying to be, it can sound pretty, too. For me, writing has to be interesting and flow. If I read something and all the words are straightforward and boring, without any “frills,” I won’t be interested. My favorite writers are the ones who come up with the best similes and metaphors, original and unique, but accurately describing whatever it is at the same time. I’m always impressed with good figurative language because it’s just so gorgeous when it’s used right. I think my favorite sentence in the entire essay is, “The next night I was back at the computer, the same white glow filtering onto my young, freckled face, my eyes perusing the words I had written the night before. They sounded good to me, connected smoothly like long, satin ribbons on the page.” For some reason I really like how I compared my words to “long, satin ribbons.” I was also proud of this sentence: “I wrote until I couldn’t think of anything else to say, and I looked over both of my letters to Annie, satisfied with the words I had so carefully strung together, blinking and glittering with emotion like Christmas lights delicately placed around a tree.” Lights on a Christmas tree evoke such a

pretty, delicate image to me. Once again, I was comparing my view of the letters I wrote to something else.

Now I feel even more confident about my essay, "Writing to Annie." Revising gives me such a sense of completion and crisp neatness; there aren't any messy sentences or awkward wordings anymore. The whole essay flows, using the right word choices and transition sentences. Although revising is the hardest part of writing to me, I've come to realize through experience how necessary it is. Even if I think something I write is perfect, there will always be some way to make it even better.