

Chapter 2: The Writing Process: Self-Reflection and Revision

Self Reflection

As writers, you are constantly making decisions and choices—rhetorical choices—to create texts that will have the desired effect upon your readers. The tone, the vocabulary, and the images you choose to include (or leave out) are carefully considered in terms of your particular purpose and in relation to the specific audience you are trying to reach.

Often these decisions are made intuitively and without much conscious thought, but if you can become more keenly aware of the thought processes behind these choices, you can improve your writing significantly. And because the physical act of writing often helps us to gain insight, the best way to become more aware and more self-conscious (in the best sense of the phrase!) is to write.

There are several terms for this kind of writing: **reflection**, **self-assessment**, and **metacognition** (which simply means “thinking about thinking”). But they have fairly similar meanings because they all involve a close examination of what we were thinking as we were writing. Probably the easiest way to begin such writing is to ask oneself a series of questions: What overall purpose was I trying to achieve and how did I organize the text in order to best achieve it? Who did I imagine the audience to be? What kind of prior knowledge can I assume they already have? How have I considered age, educational level, possible and/or probable attitudes towards the topic and the writer? How did I direct the language and images to meet the audience’s specific needs and expectations, to make them respond the way I want them to? How and why did I select specific examples and details? How and why did I emphasize one point, one character, one part of the “story” and minimize another aspect of the text? Why did I choose to adopt a certain tone (sincere? sarcastic? tongue-in-cheek?) and what words, phrases, and sentences helped me to get that across? How will the audience react to the introduction? What will they carry away from the conclusion?

It may seem like too much work to stop and write about your writing rather than to simply work on the writing assignment itself, but this is a form of working on the assignment since it’s all part of the revision process that successful writers go through. And – if done in earnest – it’s well worth the effort. You’ll often discover an idea you hadn’t thought of, see some idea that doesn’t fit with your purpose or audience, find a new connection, or discover a metaphor you hadn’t noticed lurking there below the surface of the words. By forcing yourself to write about your audience, you’ll become intensely aware of their needs and expectations, attitudes and prejudices, and you’ll be better able to address those elements as you revise. This will help your text have the desired effect on your readers and, ultimately, achieve the purpose you set out to accomplish.

It usually takes some practice to discover your own thinking process, but asking yourself questions such as those above will make you into a more self-conscious, purpose-oriented, and capable writer. This process (and you will get faster and better at it with practice!) should also help you transfer some of the more successful rhetorical strategies you've used in one paper to other assignments because when you become very aware of thoughts and ideas that are implicit (unspoken, "gut" feelings) and make them explicit (clear, out in the open), you are far more likely to remember those ideas and strategies and use them again in subsequent writing situations. You'll be able to move beyond that method of writing that involves making choices just because it "felt right," and you'll find that you will increasingly make conscious choices to address your audience, purpose, and context. In time, with continued "metacognitive practice," you will become a rhetorically aware writer – and your writing will be the stronger for it.

Revision

Revision is very important for students who are preparing a portfolio. You will need to work over your essays and cover letter many times before you submit them. You may think this need to revise is punishment or a sign of failure, but revision is just a natural part of writing.

What is revision? For most beginning writers, being asked to revise a often leads to them to believe that they have failed in the first attempt at getting the essay right. However, ask any experienced writer, and they will tell you that revision is essential, and that many of their published pieces have gone through dozens of revisions. Experienced writers know that writers hardly ever get it "right" the first time, or the second, or even the tenth.

Think about what you do when you revise. Really. Take a minute right now and think about the last essay you wrote that you revised. What did you do when you revised? You probably read through the essay a number of times, listening to the words on the page, and waiting for something to stick out, something that just didn't "sound" right. Or you fixed the spelling errors, checked the margins and font, and maybe changed a few words here and there. Maybe you changed an adjective like "super" to "tremendous" – you know, the latter, sounds better, more intelligent.

Sadly, however, this isn't revision. This is part of the writing process, no doubt, but it's called editing/proofreading. Revision is a larger process, more substantial to the growth and development of your writing, and it's hard work.

Don't feel bad, though, because chances are you simply haven't been taught what revision is or how to do it, yet. Often, the revision that is taught in high school, and some college courses, revolves around this type of "fixing."

Revision is important because writing is not just a recording of what you've already thought, but a way of building and creating new ideas based on old ones. Thus, revision is a way of

deepening, complicating, and refining the ideas you come up with in your first and second drafts. Good writing is all about good thinking, and revision is a means to discover your own good thinking.

So let’s look at revision more specifically. It’s simple, really. Look at the graph below. When we tear apart revision, we find that there are really only four possible operations, or actions, writers can take, and writers apply these operations at four separate levels.

Revision Operations	Levels of Change
Deletion	1. Word
Substitution	2. Phrase
Addition	3. Sentence
Re-Ordering	4. Theme

Look carefully. When we create any additions to a text, we can create new items at four different levels: we can add new words to a piece, new phrases, new sentences, or, maybe, if we’re working really hard, we can add a new theme to a piece of our writing. The same is true of the other operations as well.

These divisions are simple enough, but when it comes to their application, we find substantial differences between what beginning students and experienced writers are doing when they revise. The following graph is a result of study done by Nancy Sommers, Director of Writing at Harvard University. Sommers studied student writers and experienced writers by asking them about their ideas regarding revision. Here’s what she discovered.

Novice Revision Strategies	Experienced Writer Revision Strategies
Rewording activity “Cleaning Up”	1st Drafts – Scattered attempt to define essay, and find form for argument or essay
Lexical Changes (word)	Semantic word changes; changes based on subtle gradation of meaning
Little Modification of Idea / Theme (the most common attempt was trying two or three different introductions)	Revision used to <u>discover meaning</u> / theme Focused concern for Reader / Audience
Attitude: “Revision is Failure”	Attitude: “Revision is Necessary”

As you can see, there is a clear disconnect between what beginning writers do when they revise and what experienced writers do. The most glaring difference is one of focus. For example, beginning writers focus on using revision to make changes at a surface level by substituting words (probably because they sound smarter) or checking punctuation. And typically, the most significant attempts to address the overall idea in papers are to try a few different ways to begin the essay.

In the experienced writer column, however, there is no suggestion of these kinds of activities. This is not to say that experienced writers don't do them—of course, experienced writers edit and proofread their work—but their focus during the revision stage is almost entirely on meaning and discovering what they want to say thematically with a piece of writing. They use revision to find perspective and attitude for their writing.

This business of “discovering meaning” is sometimes a difficult task. Frequently, it involves writing multiple drafts, getting feedback from multiple sources, and revising a good deal. Let's look at how one student, who wrote her essay on “Asshole AI” during the summer of 2013, grew her paper and reshaped it as she went.

Brainstorming for the Essay...

The student did a good deal of brainstorming, creating a detailed cluster (web) that displayed some of the most vivid details of her trip to Louisiana. After she created the cluster, she wrote the following:

This is the first clue I got to what my essay may be about. Almost all the ideas went into the essay from the brainstorm. This is the easiest way for me to get everything I need for the essay down on paper.

First Draft –Asshole AI

Here's how the writer later described what she was trying to accomplish in her first draft:

A form and order to get an idea of how to put the pieces of the brainstorm together. My goal is just to lay it on paper. Nothing more. I do make just a couple of order notes, and comments. The lines [cross-outs] were made during the second draft. That's where the revision really started.

Here's what her Second Draft looked like:

"I promise I wont eat cha." Asshole Al said in a thick Cajun southern Lousiana accent. [Note on third draft: Work in what I later realized somewhere in here.] In the time we needed help the most. Myself and three friends went to Mardi Gras. After a few long nights, I wanted to go to a beach. So, I looked on map and seen Shell Beach on the Gulf of Mexico coast. As were drove to find Shell Beach, things didn't seem as they would approaching a beach, but we finally found what was left of shell beach. And nor was the lodging amenities, or food stores. Upon arriving threw Shell beach I seen a small shanty with creative decorations a sign hanging on the porch saying "Tilton Hilton Crooked Lodge." On the way out of town **[Note on third draft: way into town]** desperate for the basic needs of a bathroom. I had a friend traving with me stop and ask for directions to campground or hotel.

[Notes on third draft: Move some of this material around.] The small shanty that Had "Tilton Hilton Crooked Lodge" in neatly painted wooden letters above the porch. My friend and I nervously knocked on the door with a bumper sticker in the window saying "Asshole is a way of life." **[Note on third draft: Fix what it actually said.]** And decorations of axes, a huge steam barrel on the front porch. Asshole Al answers the door (later to know his name is Alton) a thin man, unshaven and worn out clothes, hand nails dirty, pondered what we said, and said "I promise I won't each cha, but jalls can stay here and wash up in bathroom and sleep in the prola camper in the the back. For how ever long jall need." ~~After we settled in. He asked us lots of questions, like how four people from Illinois ended up at shell Beach, as we asked our own question.~~ **[Note on third draft: Move explanation of Alton's name around.]**

Sitting in a very small room/kitchen 12 x 20 space, still wondering if this good idea.

We learned a lot while drinking the best Homeade strawberry wine. Alton (Asshole Al) as he liked being called. His home which resembled a wooden cabin. I learned was made from left over wood from Hurricane Katrina. Even though his prowler (camper) is bigger than his house, his house was cozy and looking around I seen plaques! Alton is 4th generation Cajun that's lived in shell beach Louisiana, his entire life, he was a firefighter for 27 years until putting out a fire ina two story house, he was doing a search and fell threw the 2nd story permently injury his back and forced to retire. Mis his food came from bayous, and trade in vigeerie gardens from other neighbors. When Hurricane Katrina hit Alton did not leave his home. He choose to stay with many in his community. Many left and never came back. After the mess was over Alton took no time rebuilding his home "the Tilton Hilton." And helped everyone in his community build their homes. Of course as he sipped on his Canadian Mist, he remembered those he lost. He built a beautiful memorial at the site were Shell Beach is now just Rock. For all those who died in Katrina, for the families who will never have a body to put in a casket to visit. After a night of way to much yummy homemade strawberry wine, we slept very cozy in his prowler. [Note on third draft: mention his speech, which was slurred, and why he built memorial.]

~~Next day I noticed he had crab traps, I told him I'd pay whatever he want for the crab in the traps. "Naw naw jall just empty dem and I cook you bayou possum stew."~~ [Note on third draft: different story. Maybe scrap this.]

Asshole Al not just influenced me, but completely changed the outlook, value, and way I see life. Strength of people, gives me strength, love and giving and amazing

community that could be, appreciated value of life every day. Strength that people can survive if they stick together, these people never gave up never left their home, showed me each day is one step/brick at a time. On days when I feel I don't have the strength, I think of Alton. How him and the people of Shell Beach built their lives all over.

You find the most amazing stories and people and that not all strangers are bad company, if you just stop, don't judge, don't turn your back and cherish the odd ways life's lessons are intended and he kept good to his promise.

"He didn't eat us."

Writer's Note about her Third Draft...

This is a more clear lay out of the first two drafts. This is where I decided what needs to stay, what needs to go. Start forming an order and thinking of purpose for my audience. Making sure everything I write hits the topic. And noticing if structure is right.

Note about her Fourth Draft...

This is the computer version. My purpose was to lay out what I had done in MLA [Modern Language Association] format. Seeing how much content I had, if I needed to add or take away anything to make it the right length. Went over what was required. This paper I also had reviewed by my peers, to see if my purpose was understood. I also asked them questions to make sure I got feedback. Then I fixed what needed and went on to the next draft. This draft continued to change as I went. **[Draft shows classmates' electronic peer review comments in the margins. She also received feedback from her instructor.]**

Final Draft (Draft Five) -- Asshole Al

"I promise I wont eat cha," Asshole Al said in a raspy, thick Cajun accent. One would not expect to have a life changing experience from an individual whose first impression was greatly questionable. Although Al was from a humble lifestyle and had his own problems he would leave an impression on my life. A self admitted alcoholic who enjoys his prescription medication, Al taught me that even people with problems (such as addiction) can be a great help to those around him.

After a few rough nights at Mardi Gras in Louisiana, my friends and I agreed to go to the beach. A quick search resulted in us venturing to Shell Beach, a two-hour drive away. When we arrived we were surprised to find no beach but, instead, what was left of Shell Beach after Hurricane Katrina.

Shell Beach was a small community that did not offer the amenities that my friends and I were searching for. On the way into town, I noticed a small, elaborately decorated shanty, with neatly painted letters hanging on the home that read, "Tilton Hilton Crooked Lodge." Desperate for a bathroom, we stopped to ask for directions. As we approached the porch I became nervous after noticing the display of fire axes and a bumper sticker on the screen door that said, "Asshole--not just a word, but a lifestyle." Then the door opened and my perception of life would change forever.

Asshole Al was a thin man, with a long beard, worn out clothes, and dirty hands. Al walked walked from the door to his electric scooter as we explained our dilemma and asked for any useful information. The first thing he said to us, after a

heavy cough from too many cigarettes and Canadian Mist, was, "I promise not ta eat cha, j'all's can stay here, worsh up In dafa room and sleep in dat prowler in the back dat gits lect-roi-sity. " With dumbfounded looks on our faces he says, "wells j 'alls stayin er what?"

As we were sitting in the small shanty I found out that Asshole Al's name was Alton. Al offered us some of the best homemade strawberry wine I have ever tasted along with a detailed story about how it was made .Looking around his cabin I noticed a lot of newspaper clippings and plaques hanging on the wall as well as his collection of firefighter memorabilia. We had learned that he was a firefighter for 37 years before he was injured. While looking for people in an abandoned building, the foundation gave and he fell through the second floor permanently injuring his back. Although he was still able to walk he used his electric scooter when the pain became unbearable. While waiting for us four travelers to freshen up, Al answered a lot of my questions, particularly why his name was Asshole Al to which he told me, "cause it's a way of life to survive."

I found out that his house was constructed from pieces of wood found from Hurricane Katrina. When Katrina passed Al wasted no time helping rebuild his community. He assisted other people by building these cozy cabins for temporary shelter until the insurance companies or other aid was available to help them. He would go around finding sinks, toilets, other plumbing pieces, and anything else needed for the shelters then cleaned them up and installed them. The cabins consisted of a small living room, kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom in approximately 20 feet by 12 feet in space. Amazingly, he was

able to accomplish this feat for many of the people in his community. He did this because these people were not just his neighbors; they were people that he considered his family. Since a majority of the community relied on food sources from the bayou, Al also spent his time working on boats to get them up and running. With working boats the community no longer had to worry about where they would get their food and could focus on more important matters at hand.

While we were there he sat back, sipped his Canadian Mist, popped a repeated dose of medication and remembered those he had lost. He told me that it was hard on him and the families to have lost people in the raging winds and vicious waters. It was even more difficult to never have their loved ones bodies returned to lay to rest. Slurring his Cajun speech from too much whiskey and his concoction from the pill holder, he tells me, "fur da dem families I built dat memorial, I built da place fur dem to visit dir missin loved ones." Near the beach he built a very beautiful memorial consisting of a tombstone engraved with the names of all who died surrounded by wonderfully colored landscape.

After too much yummy homemade strawberry wine, we moseyed to the prowler, a camper that was bigger and nicer than his house. I laid there before I slept thinking about Al, what he had accomplished, and everything he did for his community. It was not the actions that I expected from someone with the name Asshole Al who drank whiskey and popped pills as he did.

Asshole Al completely changed my outlook on life and how I value it. Two years ago we went to Shell Beach and still saw their rebuilding efforts. Their

community is comprised of strength, love, and perseverance, things I have rarely ever seen. The people never gave up and still refuse to. They handle things one step at a time while rebuilding brick by brick. On days I think I cannot handle one more thing or move forward one more step in life, I think of AI and how this community rebuilt their entire lives. There is no way I can give up considering how petty my issues are compared to those who had to live through Katrina.

You find the most amazing stories and people in your travels and you come to find out that not all strangers are bad company. People should stop judging, not turn their backs, and cherish the odd way life teaches you lessons. And, in the end, AI kept good on his promise. He "didn't eat us."

Between the Drafts: Another Example of Revision at Work

Draft 1: CHALLENGING JOURNEY

I am far from being your traditional college student. I have been out of school for almost sixteen years. I am thirty-three years old, married, and employed full-time and raising four very active children. For me there are many challenges in attending college. I had to get back into the nightly routine of doing homework. I thought about the amount of time and money that would be required. Where would I get the funds to attend? I looked at the status of the economy and thought would educational funding be cut? If this would be the case, what would be my other alternatives for paying for tuition? After considering all this, I often asks myself is it worth it? My answer was obviously yes. I will have my associate's degree in sociology. This will allow me to obtain better employment opportunities, better income as well as work with victims of domestic violence. I chose this career path because I was once a victim and I would rather help someone, than sit back and ridicule or condemn them. I feel that I can relate to them.

My family had a great deal of influence in me furthering my education. They all were strong in supporting me. Without that extra encouragement, I might have prolonged going back. I guess you could say I was doubting myself and my capabilities. It was not that I could not do it. It was my age, circumstances and the fear of the unknown. I thought about it and put my words into action. I figured I could be one of those people that set around complaining or set out and did something about it. I decided to be the musician playing my melody for life.

My life has changed since I began school. I am better at multi-tasking and I had to get use to the fact of starting all over again. I am better at it because, I have multiple assignments due on the same day. I began to welcome challenges and not allow myself to get discouraged. Allowing yourself to become frustrated you may decide to throw in the towel. Then you will have wasted your time, effort and possibly a large sum of money.

To those about to take my journey I am on, the key advice I will give to you is not to allow yourself to become overwhelmed and stay positive. In the end it will be well worth it. The day will come when you are in your cap and gown about to have your credentials in hand and ready to take on the world. I think when that day comes I will be like an eager youngster the night before Christmas.

Draft 2: A CHALLENGING JOURNEY

I am far from being your traditional college student. I have been out of school for almost sixteen years. I am thirty-three years old, married, and employed full-time and raising four very active children. It is far from easy. While reading this paper you may ask how I manage it all, it is through much prayer and by the grace of God. For me, there are many challenges in attending college. I thought about the amount time and money that would be required. Where would I get the funds to attend? I looked at the status of the economy and thought, would educational funding be cut? If this would be the case, what would be my other alternatives for paying for tuition and books? After considering all this, I often asks myself is it worth it? My answer was obviously yes. I will have my associate's degree in sociology. This will allow me to obtain better employment opportunities, better income as well as work with victims of domestic violence. I chose this career path because I was once a victim and I would rather help someone, than sit back and ridicule or condemn them plus, I feel that I can relate to them.

My family had a great deal of influence on me furthering my education. They all were strong in supporting me. Without that extra encouragement, I might have prolonged going back. I guess you could say I doubted myself and my capabilities. It was not that I could not do it. It was my age, circumstances and the fear of the unknown. I thought about it and put my words into action. I figured I could be one of those people that set around complaining or set out and did something about it. I decided to be the musician playing my melody for life. My husband kept telling me, "You will never know until you try and do you

want to be one of those people that are always saying I should have done this or that, living a life full of regrets?”

All of my children told me that they would help me with my assignments. “To this day they all give me suggestions and encourage me to dig deeper and put my best foot forward. Just as I have instilled in them. That alone makes me strive to succeed. My only son will read over my essays and say, “this does not sound right or why don’t you change it to this.” Then there are my girls, they always read my papers and tell me, “Why do you have this in here?” With all their simple modifications my papers come alive. I guess you could say there are my little peer responders.

My life has changed since I began school. I am better at multi-tasking and I have gotten use to the fact of starting all over again. I am better at it because, I had multiple assignments due on the same day and multiple things to do at home. On the days I have to work, I rise at five in the morning, prepare everyone’s lunch for the day, make sure all my children’s necessary papers have been signed such as permission slips and pull something out of the freezer for dinner. I get back home by three p.m. and drop one of my girls off at basketball practice and the other two at girl scouts. After all that I back home again starting my homework and later cooking dinner. As you can see my days are never dull. I began to welcome challenges and not allow myself to get discouraged. Allowing myself to become frustrated I may decide to throw in the towel. Then I will have wasted my time, effort and possibly a large sum of money.

To those about to take the journey I am on, the key advice I will give to you is not to allow yourself to become overwhelmed and stay positive. In the end it will be well worth it. The day will come when I am in my cap and gown about to have my credentials in hand and ready to take on the world.

Revision is challenging work. Revision takes time and effort, a real critical look at your own writing, and honesty, but in the end, the payoff is great.