**Revision**

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With help from *Being a Writer* by Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff

As you probably know, few writers spin out the polished prose that appears in their published works the first time they sit down at the computer. Almost everything we read has been through the process of revision. If you want your writing to be clear, persuasive and enjoyable to read, revision should always be a part of your writing process. Revision isn’t easy; it takes time and critical thought, but it is key in producing good writing.

**Revision Is Not Editing**

In their book *Being a Writer,* Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff differentiate between revision and editing:

“Many students equate revision with correcting mechanics or copyediting. Experienced writers never confuse the two. For them, revision means entering into a conversation with their previous thoughts. They match what they have already written against what they now wish to say and create out of the two a new piece that suits their present purpose.” (124)

Editing—checking for errors in spelling and mechanics—is an important step in writing anything, but it should never be the only action the writer takes after completing a draft.

**Revision Is Never Done**

No art is ever perfect; writing can always be improved. At some point, though, a writer must decide to call a draft finished. Elbow and Belanoff contend that the never-ending nature of revision makes the process hard to define. They conclude, “Probably the best definition is that revising is whatever you do to improve a piece of writing in terms of getting close to what you want to say” (124).

**Bones, Muscles and Skin**

Elbow and Belanoff identify three levels of revision. The metaphor of bones, muscles and skin can help clarify the task at each level.

**Level 1**: Reseeing or rethining: changing what a piece says, or its “**bones**.”

**Level 2:** Reworking or reshaping: changing how a piece says it, or changing its “**muscles**.”

**Level 3**: (Editing) Copyediting or proofreading for mechanics and usage: checking for deviations from standard conventions, or changing the writing’s “**skin**.” (124).

The back page offers strategies for each of these levels of revision…

**Bones**

When revising the “bones” of a piece, you change *what* your writing says. Maybe you don’t agree with what you wrote anymore. Maybe you didn’t grasp the full implication of your argument. Maybe you found new information that shifts the whole piece towards a new focus. It’s very common for writers to abandon—or radically redirect—a rough draft.

Some suggestions:

* Share your draft with someone else. (Hey! A COWS tutor is someone else.)
* Read your draft, go make a cup of tea, and then sit down and allow a few minutes of freewriting. Simply write about your subject. Maybe new thoughts will arise in light of your first draft.
* Choose the most interesting sentences of your draft. Freewrite about why they are the most interesting.

**Muscles**

When revising the “muscles” of a piece, you change *how* your writing says what it says. Is your writing clear? Will your readers understand its nuances?

Some suggestions:

* In the margins, write the purpose each paragraph. Then ask yourself: does this paragraph achieve what I intend it to achieve?
* Keep an eye out for abstractions. COWS director Lydia McDermott breaks abstractions into four categories:

Level 4: abstraction—intangible ideas (e.g. love, hope, truth, success)

Level 3: noun classes—broad groups with little specification (e.g. woman, dogs, Americans)

Level 2: noun categories—more definite subgroups (e.g. working mothers, African-Americans, astronauts)

Level 1: specific, identifiable nouns—a unique instance (e.g. My mother, Donald Trump, tulip bulb, bull)

Wherever possible, abstractions should be replaced with specific language.

*Jean Paul Sartre defined evil as “man’s ability to make abstract that which is concrete.”*

* Check to make sure sentences follow the “Known-New Contract.” Professor McDermott explains the contract like this:

“The Known-New Contract” exists between writer and reader, where the writer has a responsibility to the reader to lead her step by step toward new information by reviewing information that has already been introduced. When we drop in new information without tying it to something we’ve already established in our writing, it is jarring for the reader. The “Known-New Contract” applies from sentence to sentence as well as from paragraph to paragraph.”

A simple example of “Known-New Contract” at the sentence level: The dog ate cheese. The cheese had gone bad; it was a terrible green. The first sentence makes the cheese known. The second sentence introduces new information about the state of the cheese. Therefore, these two sentences follow the “Known-New Contract.”

**Skin**

When revising the “skin” of a piece, you clean up mistakes in spelling, mechanics and style conventions. This is the final step before turning in a draft.

* Keep a style manual nearby. Double check that your citations are correct and you follow the conventions of whatever style you are using. Style errors look sloppy and can distract your reader from the content of your writing.
* Check out the COWS handout “Six Basic Writing Errors” to help catch common mistakes.
* Don’t trust your spell check. It won’t catch errors in capitulation, abbreviations, italics usage, etc.

*And then, at some point, you call it quits, and turn in what you have.*

*Your draft isn’t perfect, but your revision work will certainly show.*