

Helping Students Revise

Revision is a foundational stage of the writing process. Student and other novice writers benefit from revising based on feedback from peers and faculty, but they often struggle to understand what revision is and how to actually revise. So, faculty should play an active role in helping students revise.

Revision: A summary of research

Revision is the practice of refining a piece of writing for an intended purpose and audience. Some scholars believe revision begins as soon as writing does while others locate it later in the writing process. Either way, revision includes a number of stages that address larger rhetorical concerns before more narrow linguistic concerns. Novice writers tend to understand revision as editing, fixing largely surface level issues. However, experienced writers typically place more effort on developing content and considering rhetorical decisions about audience, purpose, and genre first.

This difference in understanding often creates challenges in the classroom because students and faculty are focused on different concerns. Furthermore, students are willing to revise, but they often lack knowledge, time, and/or concrete strategies for how to revise. Instructors need to help students understand and plan for revision. Creating revision plans, comparing drafts, and reflecting on changes can help students develop more awareness of their writing and revising processes.

Stages of revision

Re-seeing: developing and rethinking the meaning and purpose of a piece (big picture)

Reshaping: rearranging the organization and refining the topic for the audience (structure)

Editing or proofreading: refining surface-level considerations like style, spelling, and mechanics

Strategies for revising

Expand: add new details, make a comparison or a contrast, ask journalistic questions (who, what, when, where, why), add variety to evidence (qualitative, quantitative; micro-, macro-)

Narrow: create a sentence or reverse outline, write a one-sentence summary, write an abstract or elevator pitch, view the topic through a one-inch frame (what is the one thing readers must know?)

Shift: rearrange content and begin with a different paragraph or sentence, write a dialogue between stakeholders, shift point of view (3rd to 1st), play the doubting game, write a metaphor

Transform: write to a new audience, write in a new genre, change or include new media

Some activities to promote revision

Hot-spotting: Have students complete this individually or with peers. Ask them to read their own or a peer's draft to identify three or more spots (sentence or paragraph) where the writing is working well; then have them choose one of their own hotspots, copy it to a new document and begin drafting from there.

Elevator pitch: Put students in groups or conduct this in a conference; then, give them 30 seconds or 1 minute to describe their projects and why they are important.

Reverse outlining: ask students to outline their own or a peer's draft writing the main idea of each paragraph in one sentence. You might also ask students to write a second sentence describing the function of the paragraph.

Revision plans: after students have received peer and/or faculty feedback, ask them to summarize the main suggestions, the suggestions they intend to act upon, the reasons for their decisions, and their plan for making the changes.

Some advice to support revision

Define it: talk with your students about revision. Ask them what they think it is and how they do it; then be clear about what you want them to do when you ask them to revise. Finally, make sure your feedback promotes it by asking questions or praising content and structure.

Model it: consider using model texts to demonstrate productive and unproductive revision. How did drafts develop and what changes were made? Also consider sharing or modeling your own process: what do you change? Why do you make specific changes? How and when do you revise?

Direct it: don't see revision as something that happens after a draft is complete; revision happens throughout the writing process. Structure assignments so that you can provide short, targeted pieces of feedback and give students one or two concrete tasks that move them toward a complete draft.

Value it: include revision in your rubric or grading criteria if you are expecting it to happen, but give students an opportunity to make changes risk free.

Further reading

Horning, A. S., & Becker, A. (Eds.). (2006). *Revision: History, theory, and practice*. Parlor Press.
<https://wac.colostate.edu/books/referenceguides/horning-revision/>

Eli Review. (2020). Teaching revision. <https://elireview.com/content/td/revision/>