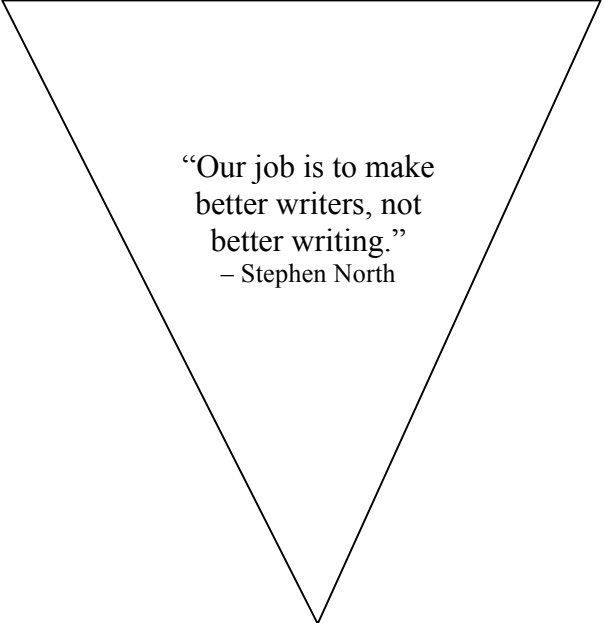


# Encouraging Productive Revision: Responsible Teachers, Responsible Student-Writers

Like any pedagogical decision, revision requires careful course planning. These recommendations reflect my assumptions that genuine revision occurs only in classes that make revision a central tenet of class outcomes.

1. A Revision-Centered Course: revised drafts must be the focus, which means that “perfect” texts are less important than students’ attempts to seriously rework and reconsider their ideas and options as writers.
2. Student Ownership: although broad guidelines are often appropriate in (FYC), students are more likely to *own* and *invest in* their texts if they choose their own topics. Projects should have genuine audiences.
3. Revision Accountability: students must be required to *demonstrate* their revision processes, which means their keeping up with peer responses activities and having their grades connected to how well they perform on peer response.
4. Contextual Revision: revision suggestions and decisions must be contextually purposeful, utterly connected to the specific essay/project. Teacher responses should also be audience-based, not teacher-based.
5. Productive Peer-Review Activities: activities that teachers choose should encourage students to look at broad issues (missing information, audience needs/concerns, relevance of topic to current situations/discourses) but also to focus on what “works” in the text. Students should learn to ask their own questions (see handout at <http://personal.ecu.edu/banksw/eng1100/askingquestions.html>)
6. Revision v. Editing: teachers should *not* confuse revision with copy-editing/sentence-level changes to texts; likewise, they must make this distinction clear to students.
7. Revision Reflection: teachers should engage students in meta-cognitive analyses of their revision processes (i.e., Writer’s Memos).
8. Evaluation: teachers should make reference to revisions from previous drafts as part of their evaluation comments/recommendations.



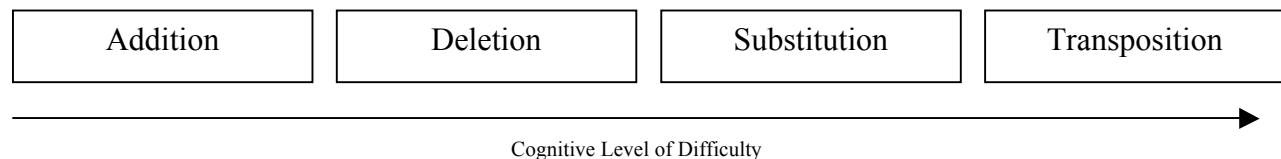
“Our job is to make  
better writers, not  
better writing.”  
– Stephen North

## Discussing Revision with Students

Revision itself is a nebulous concept for most students. In high schools, many teachers use revision to mean “copy-editing,” and tend to reduce revision to worksheets to help readers identify “thesis statements” and “topic sentences.” We might think of *revision* as the one thing that students really haven’t seen/done before, the one really “new” thing we can teach them. Here are some suggestions.

If teachers want genuine revision on student-written projects, they must think carefully about what revision means to them as teachers and as writers, why they themselves revise and when, but mostly, what role they think the student essays play in class: are they just to answer questions the teacher has posed? are they to demonstrate student mastery of a topic the teacher has chosen? are they a chance for students to explore a new idea or concept? are they opportunities for students to address a specific audience about a particular issue/topic/subject?

### Types of Revision



### Modeling Revision

Creating productive overheads or web pages which have examples of drafts *written by students*, drafts which move from early stages (e.g., freewriting) to middle stages (e.g., first teacher review) to later stages (e.g., polished draft for specific audience), can show students specifically what we mean when we say *revision*. Instruction should focus on how these drafts *change* and how those changes affect audience and purpose.

### Focused Peer Response

Student-writers are more productive if their peer-reviews are focused on specific issues. Early draft peer review can focus on issues of rhetorical *invention* (conjecture, value, possibility, stasis, etc.); the idea is to *invent* more information for the writer to consider including in the project. Middle stages of peer review might center of rhetorical *focus*, in particular identifying possible audiences and choosing which ideas are relevant to each audience. Later stages of peer review might focus on arrangement of ideas, *kairos* (timeliness), etc.

### Writer’s Memo

In a Writer’s Memo, students begin to *own* both their essays and their revision processes. These documents require students to analyze their choices as writers and explain how and why they made specific revisions. Because students must actively participate in class peer-review to do this part of the assignment, peer review and revision both tend to improve.

## Asking Good Revision Questions

We talked in class about how to get good feedback from peers. One method that Donald Murray and Peter Elbow recommend involves knowing how to ask good questions of your readers. This is a skill that takes time to develop, and if you've never done it before, then realize that you need to work hard at it. Regardless, here are some examples of productive and unproductive questions:

Two "rules":

1. Don't ask "composition" questions: questions about thesis statements, topic sentences, transitions, etc. Leave those to later, if you ask them at all.
2. Don't ask "grammatical/mechanical" questions: don't comment on things like subject-verb agreement, comma splices, or spelling. Those things can be worked out later, too. Right now, asking about them just takes away time that should be spent on deciding if the paragraphs that are written should even continue to exist at all. Fixing paragraphs that the writer ends up deleting seems like a waste of time to me.

**Unproductive Questions:** Questions that can be answered with a "yes" or a "no" are *unproductive*. Questions that require the reader to *rewrite* your paper are *unproductive* questions.

- Was the point clearly understood by the end?
- Is my ideas very clear that I am for the freedom of rights and do you understand my points?
- Do you believe I had enough examples and evidence to support my ideas?
- Did I clearly state a thesis statement and did I show its format?
- How can I explain, in my essay, my thoughts and then my facts?
- How can I bring my ideas together?

**Productive Questions:**

- How does my experience with my older brother relate to your experiences with siblings? If it doesn't, how was your experience different?
- Is more information on Newton North needed for the story to really grasp you? What else might you need to know about the school?
- Do you know any, openly or not, homosexual people? How do you think their life would change if they were open about it or if they had to stay "in the closet"?
- How can high schools create a more accepting atmosphere for all students?
- What problems do you see with students being openly gay in high school?

These questions were all asked by former students of mine. From the first set of questions, we have no idea even what the topic at hand is, do we? From the second, we can probably guess the topic. Why, besides that, are the second set of questions more useful for getting feedback?

## Writer's Memo / Writer's Reflection

All writers "luck up" once in a while, do a little something special in their writing that's unexpected or that has unexpected results with readers. But for the most part, writers work hard at drafting and revision, and each change seems part of a slow and arduous process of figuring out where to go, what to do, what to say. "Good" writers can also, then, talk about what they've done, taking responsibility for the choices they have made, articulating the reasons for those choices, recognizing the effects those choices may have on certain readers.

For the Writer's Memo, I want you to demonstrate your abilities as that second type of writer. If we spend two weeks (or more, sometimes) inventing information, drafting possible versions of a text, responding to each other, revising our texts, etc., then we should be able to talk about the processes we went through to get to this finished draft. To that end, please draft a memo to me, as teacher-evaluator, to help me see your particular processes and what vision you have for this text (that I might have a context in which to read). Below is a template you can use for your memo:

Student Name Course # & Section Teacher Name Date
Writer's Memo
Paragraph #1: Trace the evolution of this project. When did you decide on this topic? What topics did you reject in favor of this one? How did your topic evolve from what you knew at first to what you know now? (Other comment relevant to topic evolution)
Paragraph #2: Discuss the specific revisions you've made to the project. What revision suggestions did you get? from whom? Which did you choose to use? Why? Which did you reject? Why? Where in the project did you make these changes? What effects do these choices have on your project/your readers? Why?
Paragraph #3: Purpose/Audience/Publication. Explain in one sentence what the purpose of your project is: are you trying to argue something? persuade a reader about something? tell as story to illustrate a point about the world? explore pertinent issues? etc . . . Then, tell me who your <i>primary</i> audience is (those you most want to write to) and why you chose them. Be sure to include what sort of publication site your piece would be appropriate for (or toward which you're working even if you're not really ready yet for that space).

You should be able to produce this memo in one single-spaced page. If you can't say it in one page, cut cut cut. Sometimes, to write reflective/analytical pieces like these, we start by rambling, trying to figure out what we have to say. Fine, but go back and get rid of the "fluff." **I won't accept them if they're not typed and single-spaced in Times New Roman 12 pt. font.**