# Rewriting

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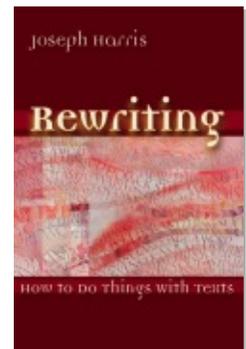
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# 5

# Revising

FIRST DRAFT OF PAPER INADVERTENTLY BECOMES FINAL DRAFT
*EUGENE, OR—The first draft of an English 140 paper by University of Oregon sophomore Marty Blain ultimately became the final draft, Blain reported Monday. "I was gonna keep working on it and add a bunch of stuff about how the guy who wrote* [The Great Gatsby] *was affected by a lot of the stuff going on around him," she said. "But then I was like, fuck it." Blair said that she spent the time that would have been devoted to revision watching* Friends *in her dorm's TV lounge.*
—*The Onion,* September 27, 2000

*I'm dying for some action*
*I'm sick of sitting 'round here trying to*
*write this book.*
—Bruce Springsteen, "Dancing in the Dark"

So far in this book I've offered you four moves for rewriting—for making the words, ideas, and images of others part of your own project as a writer. In this last chapter, I propose some ways of using those moves in *revising*—that is, in rethinking, refining, and developing— your own work-in-progress as writer. *Revising* is thus a particular form of what throughout this book I've called *rewriting;* it names the work of returning to a draft of a text you've written in order to make your thinking in it more nuanced, precise, suggestive, and interesting.

My method here will be to work in the mode of the previous four chapters—to ask what it might mean to come to terms with, forward, counter,

or take the approach of your own text-in-progress. My hope is that doing so will allow me offer a view of revising that, on the one hand, doesn't reduce it to a mere fiddling with sentences, to editing for style and correctness, but that also, on the other hand, avoids lapsing into mystical exhortations for risk taking or critical self-awareness or some other vague but evidently desirable quality of mind. My aim is instead to describe revising as a knowable practice, as a consistent set of questions you can ask of a draft of an essay that you are working on:

- *What's your project?* What do you want to accomplish in this essay? (Coming to Terms)
- *What works?* How can you build on the strengths of your draft? (Forwarding)
- *What else might be said?* How might you acknowledge other views and possibilities? (Countering)
- *What's next?* What are the implications of what you have to say? (Taking an Approach)

While these questions are straightforward, they are not easy. Revising is the sort of thing that is fairly simple to describe but very hard to do well—like playing chess, or serving in tennis, or teaching a class. It is also an activity that tends to be hidden from view. As readers we usually come upon texts in their final form—with many of the hesitations, repetitions, digressions, false starts, alternative phrasings, inconsistencies, speculations, infelicities, and flat-out mistakes of earlier drafts smoothed over, corrected, or erased. Another way to put this is to say that finished texts tend to conceal much of the labor involved in writing them. Since we rarely get to see the early drafts of most published texts, it can often seem as though other writers work, as it were, without ever blotting a line, confidently progressing through their texts from start to finish, paragraph to paragraph, chapter to chapter, as if they were speaking them aloud. This one-draft view of writing is reinforced by most movie and TV depictions of writers at work, as we watch them quickly type perfectly balanced and sequenced sentences until, with a sigh of satisfaction, they pound out The End or press Send. It is also a view inculcated by the pace and structure of American schooling, whose frequent exams reward students who can produce quick clean essays

on demand. A result is that much of what little instruction that does get offered in writing tends to focus on questions of correctness. Handbooks are filled with advice on proofreading and teachers downgrade for mistakes in grammar and spelling.

But while the moments of both inspiration and correction, of creating a text and fixing its errors, are well marked in our culture, the work of revision, of rethinking and reshaping a text, is rarely noted. With the exception of a few literati who, in anticipation of future biographies and critical editions, seem to save all their papers, early drafts tend to get cleared off the desk or deleted from the hard drive once a project is finished, or even as it is being written. In fact, one of the few places where you can readily trace how a project evolves from one draft to the next—and thus make the labor of writing it more visible—is in a university writing course. Several of the examples in this chapter are thus drawn, with their permission, from the writings of students in courses I have taught. Each is an example of a student working with—commenting on, analyzing, rethinking—a draft of his or her own writing. For that is perhaps the key challenge of revising, to find a way to step outside of your own thinking and to look at the text you are working on as another reader might. But before looking at strategies for revising in detail, let me briefly distinguish it from two other important forms of work on an academic essay.

## Drafting, Revising, Editing

For most academic writers, work on a piece begins long before they sit down at a keyboard or desk and continues well past their first attempts at putting their thoughts into prose. They tend, that is, to imagine a text they are writing less as a performance (which is what an exam calls for) and more as a work-in-progress, as an ongoing project that they can add to and reshape over time. And while the working habits of individual writers are too varied to be generalized into a single process of composing, you can think of the labor of writing as involving:

- Drafting, or generating text.
- Revising, or working with the text you've created, rethinking and reshaping what you want to say.

- Editing, or working on your text as an artifact, preparing the final version of your document.

The three form an intuitive sequence: First, you move from ideas to words on the screen or page; next you reconsider and rework what you've written, often with the help of responses from readers; and, finally, you edit, design, and format your final document. In practice, though, these forms of work tend to be overlapping and recursive: Most writers do some amount of revising and editing as they draft (although it is usually wise not to invest too much time in polishing a passage before you know for sure if you will even include it in the final version of your text); serious revision almost always involves the drafting of some new prose; and the careful editing of a piece can often lead back into a more extensive revising of it.

By far the most elusive of these three forms of work is drafting—or what is sometimes called *invention.* Trying to figure out something to write about has been the frustration of writing students—and their teachers—for decades. Stephen King puts the problem with his usual plainspoken acuity in his novel *Misery*—in which the writer of a popular series of paperback romances is held hostage by a demented fan and forced to write a new book to her liking. (In other words, the novel is about a writing class.) Here are the thoughts of King's captive author as he desperately tries to get started on his new book:

> Another part of him was furiously trying out ideas, rejecting them, trying to combine them, rejecting the combinations. He sensed this going on but had no direct contact with it and wanted none. It was dirty down there in the sweatshops.
>
> He understood what he was doing now as TRYING TO HAVE AN IDEA. TRYING TO HAVE AN IDEA wasn't the same thing as GETTING AN IDEA. GETTING AN IDEA was a more humble way of saying *I am inspired,* or *Eureka! My muse has spoken! . . .*
>
> This other process—TRYING TO HAVE AN IDEA—was nowhere near as exalted or exalting, but it was every bit as mysterious and every bit as necessary. Because when you were writing a novel you almost always got

**Intertexts**

Stephen King, *Misery* (New York: Signet, 1988), 119–20.

roadblocked somewhere, and there was no sense in trying to go until you HAD AN IDEA.

His usual procedure when it was necessary to HAVE AN IDEA was to put on his coat and go for a walk. He recognized walking as good exercise, but it was boring. If you didn't have someone to talk to while you walked, a book was a necessity. But if you needed to HAVE AN IDEA, boredom could be to a roadblocked novel what chemotherapy was to a cancer patient.

I can't claim to have all that much to say about how to begin writing an essay. For me, like King, the deep origins of words and ideas seem more often than not mysterious and untraceable. But King does also offer us a number of useful ways of thinking about this mystery. First, he points to the importance of seizing hold of those ideas that do somehow come to you. The volume next to the one you were looking for on the library shelf, the comment from another class that continues to echo in your head, the connection you notice between the papers and books that happen to be sitting on your desk, the song or movie that a text reminds you of—work on an essay often begins with such serendipities. Second, King notes the value of patience, of knowing when you're stalled, when you simply need to take a break. Similarly, he speaks of the usefulness of boredom, of letting ideas percolate. Finally, he suggests that a writer often needs to start not from a moment of inspiration (*eureka!*) but from the need to work through a conceptual problem or roadblock. Indeed, I'd suggest that most academic writing begins with such questions rather than insights, with difficulties in understanding rather than moments of mastery.

What I hope I can tell you more about is how to revise a text you've begun to write, to work with the words you've started to put on the page or screen. Perhaps the most common mistake that student writers make is to slight the work of revising—either by trying to conceive and draft an entire text from start to end in a single sitting, without pausing to consider alternate (and perhaps more interesting) ways of developing their ideas, or by worrying so much about issues of editing and correctness that they hardly allow themselves to think about anything else at all. (It is only too possible, as any writing teacher can tell you, to create a text that is wonderfully designed, phrased, formatted, edited, and proofread—but that says

almost nothing.) Many students enter college without really ever having been asked to rethink their views on an issue or to restructure the approach they've taken in an essay. They've been trained in how to find and fix mistakes, and perhaps even in how to respond to specific questions about a draft posed by their teacher. But their final drafts are essentially the same as their first ones—only cleaner, smoother, more polished. They have been taught how to edit but not how to revise.

In revising, the changes you make to a text are connected. They form a plan of work. For instance, if in reworking the introduction to an essay, you realize that you also need to change the order of the paragraphs that follow it, then you are revising. Or if dealing with a new example also requires you to adjust some of your key words or concepts, you are revising. Or if in rethinking the implications of your argument at the end of an essay, you also begin to see a stronger way of beginning it, you are revising. And so on. In revising, one change leads to others. You edit sentences; you revise essays.

The changes you make in editing tend to be ad hoc and local. To edit is to fine-tune a document. Proofreading is the extreme case: You simply correct a typo or a mistake in punctuation and move on. Nothing else needs to be done; no other changes need to be made. Similarly, you can often edit for style, recast the wording of a particular sentence to make it more graceful or clear, without having to alter much (or anything) else in the paragraph of which it is part. You can even sometimes insert a sentence or two in a paragraph—to add an example, clarify a point, answer a question—while making few or no other changes to it. Indeed I've seen entire blocks of text dropped into an essay without sending any ripples at all into the paragraphs before or after it, but rather leaving the original flow of ideas serenely undisturbed. The aim of revising is to rethink the ideas and examples that drive your thinking in an essay; the aim of editing is to improve the flow and design of your document. Both forms of work are important. But simply editing a text that needs to be rethought and revised is like waxing a car that needs repairs to its engine.

## Tracking Revision

You can begin to see how the work of revising differs from that of editing by mapping the changes you make in moving from one draft of an essay to

the next. Most word processing programs have a "track changes" or "compare documents" tool that you can use to record the changes you make in keyboarding a new version of an essay. Using this tool allows you to mark where you

- Add to
- Delete
- Move (cut and paste)
- Rework (select and type over)
- Reformat a text you are working on.

You can of course also note and mark such changes by hand; the software simply cuts down on some of the drudgery involved.

Revising an essay is complex and difficult intellectual work. But it is work not only with ideas but text. You can't just think changes to an essay; you need to *make* them. (This is a lesson I've learned to my chagrin only too many times—as paragraphs that seemed to flow clearly in my mind when I was in the shower or out for a walk with the dogs somehow become muddled and intractable when I sit down to type them out.) At some point, that is, you have to translate plans and ideas into the material labor of adding, cutting, moving, reworking, or reformatting text. While revising clearly involves more than keyboarding, all of the work you do in rethinking a text will find its final expression in some combination of those five functions. Tracking the changes you make in keyboarding a new draft of an essay can thus help make the conceptual work you've done in revising more visible.

Let me offer an example. Here is the opening paragraph of the first draft of an essay written by Abhijit Mehta, a student in a writing course, in response to an assignment that asked him to describe some of the distinctive ways a particular group makes use of language—to reflect on how they give their own spin, as it were, to the meanings of certain words. Abhijit decided to write on the vocabulary of his own field of study, mathematics:

> The Strange Language of Math
> As our society becomes more dependant on technology, the work of mathematicians and physicists comes closer to everyday experience. In order to have a basic understanding of many modern issues and technologies, people need to become more familiar with the language

of math and science. However, mathematicians and physicists have a tendancy to use common words in a strange way. In math and physics, *nice, elegant, trivial, well-behaved, charm, flavor, strange,* and *quark* all have meanings that can be very different

from their everyday meanings. Mathematicians and physicists often use common words to express ideas that are very complex.

The rest of the essay follows the plan laid out in this paragraph, as Abhijit goes on to discuss the particular meanings mathematicians give to each of the terms he mentions—*nice, elegant, trivial,* and so on—in the order that he lists them. What the readers of his first draft told Abhijit, though, was that while in creating this catalogue of odd usages he had assembled the materials for an interesting essay, he hadn't yet suggested what those specialized uses told us about the culture of math. Indeed, the problem with the draft is hinted at in its title, which simply says that the language of math is "strange" but doesn't specify *how.* His readers thus asked Abhijit for a more precise sense of the attitudes and values that lay behind the usages he discussed. What *kind* of "strangeness" connected the ways mathematicians used these words?

Hard questions, but it turned out that Abhijit had answers to them. Here is the opening of his second and revised draft.

> The Playful Language of Math
>
> As our society becomes more dependent on technology, the work of mathematicians and physicists comes closer to everyday experience. In order to have a basic understanding of many modern issues and technologies, people need to become more familiar with the language of math and science. However, mathematicians and physicists have a tendency to use common words to describe complex things. In math and physics, *nice, elegant, trivial, well-behaved, charm, flavor, strange,* and *quark* all have meanings that can be very different from their everyday meanings. The migration of these words from common usage to their specialized usage conveys some of the playful attitude that mathematicians and physicists have towards abstract, complex problems.

And here is a version that maps the keyboarding changes between the two paragraphs. Words ~~deleted~~ from the first draft are struck through; text <u>added</u> to the second draft is underlined.

> The ~~Strange~~ <u>Playful</u> Language of Math
> As our society becomes more ~~dependant~~ <u>dependent</u> on technology, the work of mathematicians and physicists comes closer to everyday experience. In order to have a basic understanding of many modern issues and technologies, people need to become more familiar with the language of math and science. However, mathematicians and physicists have a ~~tendancy~~ <u>tendency</u> to use common words ~~in a strange way.~~ <u>to describe complex things.</u> In math and physics, *nice, elegant, trivial, well-behaved, charm, flavor, strange,* and *quark* all have meanings that can be very different from their everyday meanings. ~~Mathematicians and physicists often use common words to express ideas that are very complex.~~ <u>The migration of these words from common usage to their specialized usage conveys some of the playful attitude that mathematicians and physicists have towards abstract, complex problems.</u>

This map of changes shows that Abhijit was working on at least three different levels in moving from his first to second draft: At the most mundane level, he did some proofreading and corrected the spellings of *dependent* and *tendency.* Such work is simple correction, necessary but uninteresting. On a second level, he also edited for clarity and concision, combining two sentences that say almost the same thing in his first draft (mathematicians have a "tendancy to use common words in a strange way" and "often use common words to express ideas that are very complex") into a single briefer statement in the second ("a tendency to use common words to express complex things"). But while such editing helps the flow of this particular paragraph, its impact does not extend beyond it. While intelligent and helpful, it remains a local edit, unconnected to a larger pattern of revision throughout the essay.

The third level of work—what I would call *revision*—involves such a pattern and plan of change. By far the most ambitious change that Abhijit makes in his second draft is to move, in both his revised title and new last sentence, from a nebulous description of the language of math as "strange" to a more precise view of it as *playful.* These two changes signal an important

shift in his project as a writer—from offering a simple catalogue of some of the strange ways that mathematicians use words to making an argument about the unexpected playfulness of the field, as evidenced by its vocabulary. In the rest of his revised essay, Abhijit goes on to identify two ways in which the playfulness of mathematicians comes into view—one in their unconventional use of common words like *nice* or *trivial* and the other in their choice of exotic and fanciful terms like *quark* to describe their concepts and discoveries. This allows him to conclude his piece by contesting the cultural stereotype of the math nerd or computer geek as a humorless drone. In short, for Abhijit the notion of play becomes a generative concept, an idea that leads to other ideas, that he uses to structure and develop the revised version of his essay.

When students in the courses I teach hand in a revised draft of an essay, I require them to include with it another copy of their text on which they track all the changes they have made in moving from one draft to the next and, more important, highlight those changes that are central to their plan of revision. I then ask them to refer to this map in writing a brief reflection on their aims and strategies in revising. (See the Projects box "Mapping Your Approach" below in this chapter for the guidelines I offer students for creating this map and reflection.) And so, for instance, a version of Abhijit's opening paragraph that boldfaced changes in **revising** (as contrasted with local proofreading or editing changes) might look something like this:

> The ~~Strange~~ **Playful** Language of Math
> As our society becomes more ~~dependant~~ <u>dependent</u> on technology, the work of mathematicians and physicists comes closer to everyday experience. In order to have a basic understanding of many modern issues and technologies, people need to become more familiar with the language of math and science. However, mathematicians and physicists have a ~~tendancy~~ <u>tendency</u> to use common words ~~in a strange way.~~ <u>to describe complex things.</u> In math and physics, *nice, elegant, trivial, well-behaved, charm, flavor, strange,* and *quark* all have meanings that can be very different from their everyday meanings. ~~Mathematicians and physicists often use common words to express ideas that are very complex~~. **The migration of these words from common usage to their specialized usage conveys some of the playful attitude that mathematicians and physicists have towards abstract, complex problems.**

Those points throughout the rest of his revised essay where Abhijit returned to and developed the idea of the playful attitude of math would then also be boldfaced.

My aim here is not to denigrate the work of proofreading or editing. There is almost always a moment near the end of work on an essay when the most serious task that remains for you to do is to recheck and format your document with as much thought and care as you can give. (There was yet one more draft of Abhijit's essay to come, for instance, in which he noted in his opening paragraph that he would discuss *two* forms of playfulness in math, as well as made other local refinements to his prose.) Nor am I especially invested in advocating one particular method of mapping revision. What I do hope to have shown here, however, is how the local task of editing sentences and paragraphs differs in tangible and practical ways from the more global work of rethinking an essay. If in tracking the changes you've made to the draft of an essay, you can't point to a series or pattern of changes linked by an idea, then you haven't revised, you've only edited. With this sense of revising as rethinking in mind, then, let me turn to the four questions I proposed earlier.

## What's Your Project? Coming to Terms With a Draft

It may seem the most banal of advice to suggest that in composing an essay you should have a good sense of your overall aim in writing, of what you want to achieve in your work, but there are at least two reasons why this truism proves harder to act upon than it might at first appear. First, while academic writers tend to begin with problems that they want to investigate, with texts that intrigue or puzzle or somehow fascinate them, their essays, when completed, need not simply to pose questions but also to respond to them. You may begin work on a project simply with the goal of finding out more about a certain subject or thinking your way through a particular set of issues, but in writing about that subject you need to articulate a stance, to establish a position of your own. The orientation of your work, that is, needs to shift as you make your way through a project. (The writing researcher and teacher Linda Flower has called this moving from *writer-based* to *reader-based* prose.) Second, you will often find that your ideas evolve over the course of writing, particularly when you are at work on an

ambitious or complex project. Digressions morph into key lines of argument; examples don't quite seem to work as planned; aperçus become central ideas; afterthoughts prove more interesting than the ideas they followed; a reader's com-

ment makes you think about your subject in unexpected ways; a small shift in phrasing leads into unforeseen avenues of thought. These are not problems to be avoided in working on an essay; they are moments to be anticipated and used.

Your project as a writer is thus something you are likely to need to rethink throughout the process of working on an essay. You may find it especially useful to revisit your purposes in writing when you have completed close to a full draft of an essay. I have often found, in rereading my work at such moments, that I seem to be looking at a different piece than the one I thought I had set out to write. The question, then, is whether to rethink what I've written in order to adhere to my original plan or to revise the plan to better describe what I've ended up writing. The answer is usually some mix of both, as my sense of my project as a whole evolves alongside my attempts to write my way through particular problems and examples.

But to test your project against your draft in such a way you need a precise and detailed account of what your aims in writing actually are. You need, that is, to come to terms with your own work. And, as I suggested in the first chapter, this involves not simply restating something like your "main idea" but rather describing your project in writing—your goals, the materials you're working on, and the moves you make with those materials. I thus often require students in my courses, once they have completed a draft of an essay, to write a brief *abstract* of their work as it then stands. (A version of this assignment appears in the Projects box "Coming to Terms with Your Own Work-in-Progress" at the end of the first chapter.) In writing such an abstract your goal should not be to reintroduce your essay but to summarize its gist for someone who has not read it. You want, that is, to write a piece that describes your essay from the outside, that distills what you have to say into as clear and pointed a form as possible.

For example, if I were to abstract the second section of this chapter—"Drafting, Revising, Editing"—I might say something like this:

> In this section I define three forms of work that go into producing an essay: *drafting, revising,* and *editing.* I suggest that while our culture both romanticizes the labor of drafting and fetishizes the importance of editing for correctness, the work of revision, of rethinking writing, often goes unnoticed and undervalued. After a brief account of the mysteries of drafting (with the help of Stephen King), I argue for distinguishing the *local* changes of editing from the *global* work of revising.

As my use of italics suggests, one aim of an abstract is to bring forward the key terms and ideas of an essay. And as the main verbs of my sentences indicate ("I define," "I suggest," and "I argue"), another goal is to identify its line of thought, the moves its writer makes. (It is up to you as my reader, of course, to decide how well I have managed to catch the gist of the previous section and what aspects of it I may have glossed over or distorted.)

The point of writing an abstract of your own work is to push you to think about the essay you are writing on two levels: (1) your project as a whole; and (2) how you develop your line of thinking. In one sense, of course, it trivializes the complexities of an essay to reduce them to a single page or paragraph, but it's also a problem if you can't offer a lucid overview of your aims in writing. If it simply seems impossible to summarize an essay that you are in the process of drafting, this may be a sign that you haven't yet quite figured out what you want to say in it. On the other hand, you also want there to be a sense of surprise and nuance in how you write out your ideas, from sentence to sentence and paragraph to paragraph, that eludes complete summary—or otherwise there will be no reason for anyone to read through your piece as whole. Forcing yourself to write an abstract of an essay you've drafted can help you move between these levels, to see where your prose advances your project effectively and where it does not. Sometimes you may find that you need to rethink how you talk about your project in order to catch up with the actual work you've done in your draft. And you are also likely to find, on a practical level, that many of the sentences you compose for your abstract end up as part of your next draft, signaling key moves or points in your argument.

**Projects**

*Making a Revising Plan*

One reason, I suspect, that many writers end up simply editing rather than revising their work-in–progress is that they approach the task haphazardly, simply trying to fix mistakes or infelicities in their texts as they happen to come across them, without ever forming a larger sense of what they want to accomplish through making such changes. To counter this tendency to fine-tune rather than rewrite, I ask students in my courses, after they've gotten feedback on a piece they are writing, to form a plan for revising their work-in-progress. We then discuss these plans before they actually begin work on the next draft of their essays. In developing their revising plans, I ask students first to write an abstract of what they have drafted so far and then:

> Offer a brief but specific plan for revision. Try as much as you can at this point to describe the substance or content of the changes you want to make. See if you can answer the following questions as precisely as you can:

> - Which comments from your readers—either written on your draft or offered during a workshop—have you found most useful in rethinking your essay?
> - If you plan to add to what you've written so far, what will you say and where will it go?
> - If you now plan to revise your project in writing, how will you do so? If you want to work with any different ideas or examples, what will they be?

In coming to terms with a draft, it is also often useful to counterpose the sort of overview of an essay provided by an abstract with the more narrative working through of it offered by a *sentence outline.* To create such an outline, you simply need to go through an essay, summarizing each of its

paragraphs or sections in a single sentence. The result should be a kind of quick-paced version of your essay, in which it becomes clear how each of your moves and examples follows upon the other (or, sometimes, where they fail to do so). The trick in writing such a sentence outline is much like that in composing an abstract—you want to write new prose (rather than simply highlighting phrases from your text) and you want to focus less on the topics of your paragraphs than on what you are trying to do in them, on the moves you are making as a writer. And so, for instance, if I were to outline the previous section of this chapter, "Tracking Revision," I might produce something like this:

> I begin by suggesting that there are five basic types of changes that you can make in revising an essay: adding, deleting, moving, reworking, and reformatting. I then suggest that while revision can't be reduced to keyboarding, tracking keyboarding changes can make the conceptual work that goes into revising more visible. I then offer the first and second drafts of the opening paragraph of Abhijit's essay as an example of how to track changes and think about them. I start by reproducing his first draft and suggesting that there was a problem with the vagueness of "strange" as a descriptor for the language of math. Then I reproduce his second draft, first as plain text (so that readers don't get confused by all those strikeovers and underlines) and then with changes marked. Next I argue that this map of revision shows Abhijit working on three levels: proofreading, editing, and revision. I suggest that revision differs from editing in being *systematic* and *generative,* and reproduce yet one more version of Abhijit's second draft with revising changes bold-faced. Finally, I set up the next sections of the chapter by saying that I will now try to offer four strategies for rewriting (and not simply editing) your own work-in-progress.

I'll again leave it to you as my reader to decide how effective an outline of the preceding section this may be. But even though my example here is of an outline of a section in its final form, I hope you can begin to get a sense of how you could use this technique to identify moments in a text that you might want to rethink and rework. (They would be those points where you find yourself saying something like: "Well, what *am* I really trying to do here?" or "How does *this* sentence or idea follow from *that* one?") I've argued throughout this book that the strong use of the work of other

writers needs to be grounded in a generous understanding of their projects. The same principle applies to your own work-in-progress. Before revising an essay, you need to articulate a clear sense of your aims in writing, so you can then assess what is working in your text and what is not.

## What Works? Revising as Forwarding

An irony of revising is that writers often become so preoccupied with fixing what isn't going right in a text that they neglect to build on what is. The upshot of such attempts at remediation is often not a more interesting essay but simply one that is a little less weak. In revising you want not only to deal with the problems of a draft but also to develop its strengths. And so, when students in my courses read and respond to one another's work, I ask them to mark both those passages that strike them as especially strong and those that they have questions or worries about. (The usual code is a straight line for <u>strengths</u> and a <u>wavy</u> one for questions. You can, of course, use this system in rereading and marking your own drafts as well as in responding to the work of others.) This simple form of marking a text offers writers a map of their work that identifies those passages that their readers liked, posed questions about, or were simply indifferent toward—that no one made any particular note of. While the instinct of many writers is to let such unmarked passages stand—after all, no one has signaled them out as a problem—this third category of (non-) response more often than not points to passages that they may want to cut or abbreviate, since it is prose that has failed to draw the interest, one way or the other, of any of their readers.

You will probably want to spend most of your time reworking or developing those moments in a text that your readers have marked for either praise or question. Note that it's not always a bad sign for readers to have questions about a certain point or passage in an essay. This often means that there is something there worth thinking about, puzzling over, working through. Indeed, you can sometimes find a section of an essay both compelling and troubling at once—and I have many times seen readers mark some of the most interesting passages in an essay with both straight and wavy lines! The point is to identify those moments that have most drawn the attention of readers and to see how you can build on them, bring them forward in your next draft.

Another question to ask is *where* readers mark a draft as interesting or intriguing. Often enough, you may find that several of your readers seem engaged by a sentence that appears in the middle of a paragraph in a middle page of your essay—that is, in a spot where it might well have been missed. In revising you may thus want to consider positioning that idea more prominently—perhaps at the start of the paragraph or even shifted to the opening of your essay. Or you may learn that your readers think that your most interesting work comes at the very end of your essay, on its last page or so. In such a case, you may want to see what happens if you begin your next draft with those closing ideas and see where doing so takes your thinking. This is in fact advice that I have given to many writers. The value of writing an early draft of an essay can sometimes lie in the chance it gives you to think your way through to the point, sometimes at the very end of your draft, where you've finally figured out what is you want to say. Often the best way to build on that work is not to try to salvage the fumblings of your first pages but to continue to forge ahead, to begin your next draft from the point where you ended your first.

## What Else Might Be Said? Revising as Countering

Writers are often urged to anticipate the questions that readers might ask about their work, usually so that they can then preempt any possible objections to what they are trying to argue. While this advice makes some sense, it suffers from imagining the writing of an essay as the staking out of a position in a pro-con debate, and thus tends to lock a writer into defending a fixed point of view. But there is another, and I think more interesting, way of countering your own work-in-progress, and that is not simply to ask what possible objections might be raised to your work but also what *alternative* lines of thought you might want to pursue. You want to read a draft of an essay in ways that open up the possibilities of what you might

say rather than lock you into a particular perspective. In revising you thus need to learn how to look at your work-in-progress not simply as a finished (or nearly finished) artifact but also as a source of ideas, a starting point for more writing.

Sometimes revising involves reworking existing text, but many other times it consists of following through on an idea or an aside, building on a suggestive turn of phrase, or taking your essay in an unplanned direction. In writing there are often moments when the best thing to do is to start over—except that you won't really be starting over, but rather beginning with an idea that's grabbed you in the midst of your work on an essay, or with a new sense of where you want to go in your thinking, or even with just a few key terms or examples that you've gleaned from the experience of working on your first draft. For instance, here is how Charles Jordan described how he rethought and redrafted an essay he was writing on Thomas Bell's novel *Out of This Furnace* for an undergraduate course in critical reading:

> My paper didn't simply evolve from a mediocre paper to an acceptable one (as I suspect most of my classmates' papers did). Rather, instead of just improving on the same paper, I wrote one with a completely different point. I started out focusing on the cyclic nature of the workers' lives and their experiences, and how the cycle was a perpetual one in which those who were in this class were trapped. However, going from first to second draft, I was asked to find something I could say at the end (or at least the middle) of my analysis that I couldn't say at the beginning. I said that I thought that my analysis validated the statement that the experiences and struggles of those in this working class actually came to define the class of people in this novel. I included something to that effect briefly in my conclusion, and in a few other places throughout the paper. However, I began to realize (not only on my own but also through the help of readers) that my initial argument of the "endless cycle" was weak, and evidence was scarce and hard to find. . . . What started out being an insightful one or two line statement in my paper started seeming more and more like an interesting argument I could make, which would also be stronger (due to more evidence). So, my paper metamorphosed from a paper trying to prove the existence of this cycle into a paper trying to show that Bell tries to define this class of workers by their struggles and sacrifices. So the major change in my paper was that my arguments and examples were

then framed to support this new thesis. Also, I reworded a lot of awkward phrases, and added a few more examples. . . . Besides the fact that the main argument in the paper was changed, all the other changes I made were minor, and mostly technical.

What Charles has to say here reminds me of the passage I quoted earlier by Stephen King. Both contrast the "minor and technical" work of piecing a text together with the more central problem of finding and developing its key ideas—although Charles usefully shows how such ideas can emerge not only through happenstance (as King suggests) but also through a process of talk and revision. But there is a kind of boldness, a willingness to set aside what isn't working and to build on what is, that underlies the views of both writers. Rather than simply trying to pull together evidence for a line of thought that he had begun to realize was mediocre, Charles chose the riskier path of developing another idea. I admire that. The aim of revising should not be simply to fix up or refine a text but to develop and extend what it has to say—to make your writing more precise, nuanced, inventive, and surprising. The best form of countering a work-in-progress allows for new lines of thought to emerge.

## What's Next? Revising as Looking Ahead

One of the most difficult problems in writing involves figuring out how to close an essay or chapter or book before you've simply begun to repeat yourself. There's a familiar kind of academic essay that says almost everything it has to say in its first few pages—that begins, as it were, with its conclusions, laying out its thesis so mordantly in its opening paragraphs that its writer is left with little to do in the rest of the piece but to offer a set of supporting examples for points he or she has already made. The principal aim of such writing sometimes seems to be to ensure that there will be no surprises beyond the first page or two, that everything will follow the initial plan and argument as set out by the

writer. The conclusions of such essays thus tend to be almost wholly ornamental, bookends whose task is simply to restate what has come before.

I have no quarrel with the need to define a clear plan of work for an essay or book. You want readers to know what your project is, to have a sense of where you're headed in your thinking and what you see as at stake in your writing. (See the Project box "Mapping Your Approach".) But you also want to *develop* a line of thinking in an essay, to explore its contradictions and stuck points and ambiguities, not simply to stake out a fixed position and defend it. You want to be able to say something at the end of an essay that you couldn't say at its start, that your work in the previous pages has made possible.

A good question to ask of a draft of an essay that you are writing, then, is at what point do you simply start to restate what you've said before? For that is where you will want to bring the piece to a close. And if your experience is like mine, you may often find in rereading a draft that you have written several pages past the point where you might have ended it. I have many times found myself wondering how to conclude a piece, only to find that I already had—although without yet realizing it. You want to finish a piece not with a ceremonial flourish, a restatement of what has come before, but with a look ahead, a gesture toward work to come, a new question or idea or insight to be followed.

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**Projects**

*Mapping Your Approach*

You may find the metaphor of a *map* useful in clarifying the approach you want to take in a piece of writing. Think of this map as having two parts: an overview and road signs. The former is a passage near the start of your piece that states where you are headed in your thinking and how you will get there. For example, *In this essay I argue that . . . First, I look at . . . Then I call on . . .* An overview is often a revised version of the sort of abstract I talked about before. Road signs are brief markers throughout your text that indicate the moves

you are making as a writer. In a longer piece, road signs may be section headings (as in the chapters of this book). In a shorter essay, they may be signaled by metatextual phrases like *An example of this problem is . . .* or *Some implications of this stance are . . .* or *By way of concluding, let me . . .*

First, read through your text and highlight its overview and road signs. Then, check to see if your overview really describes your essay as it now stands. Sometimes you end up in different place at the end of a piece than you thought you were headed toward at its start. Sometimes you find alternate lines of inquiry. Sometimes you simply wander off track. If your overview and essay don't correspond with each other, decide which you want to change.

Finally, check to see if you have clearly marked the turns of thought throughout your text. If you list your subheads and/or metatextual phrases, these should offer a workable outline of your essay. If not, then you may need to mark the steps of your thinking more clearly.

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A powerful close to an essay or book responds to two questions: *So what?* and *What's next?* By this I don't mean that such questions are posed explicitly—they rarely are—but that readers should finish a text with a strong sense of how they have been asked to change what they feel or believe, as well as of what would be involved in continuing to think along the lines you have proposed, of what it would mean for them to take on *you*r approach. In revising, then, you want to ask yourself the same question as you consider how to close an essay: How might this piece point toward new work, new writing?

It is an ambitious question—and one that you need to work toward answering throughout the whole of your essay and not simply at its conclusion. But it is not an impossible question to ask or answer. For instance, in an early draft of an analysis of the term *sketchy,* an adjective then in common use at both Duke and many other college campuses, Justin Lee concluded with this paragraph:

> Sketchy has become more than a word used in context at Duke to refer to
> unsure ideas. It has become a transformer itself—reshaping people's at-
> titudes and thoughts. As a sort of personal character modifier, *sketchy* is
> now a powerful integrity-altering word that forms a powerful impact.

While this is not a terrible close to an essay, it failed to get at the idea driving the work that Justin had done throughout his piece—which was that there was something suspect about a term, *sketchy,* that could be used to indicate vague disapproval of almost anything, without ever really indicating what the grounds for that disapproval were. And what could a reader do with the vague idea that sketchy somehow had a "powerful impact" on the "integrity" of its users? What did his analysis point toward? It was hard to say. So this is how Justin revised his closing paragraph:

> *Sketchy* has become more than a word used in context at Duke to refer
> to unsure ideas. It has become a transformer itself—reshaping people's
> attitudes and thoughts. As a sort of personal character modifier, *sketchy*
> is an influential character-altering word that carries a powerful im-
> pact. What I have come to discover through the course of this paper is
> that sketchy is also at times a less than ideal word to use. Ironically, its
> strength is also its weakness. To see this connection clearly, think about
> what makes *sketchy* a perfect word sometimes—its vagueness does.
> *Sketchy* carries an almost deliberate non-committal interpretation, in
> that it has such a wide range of uses. This means that people can say it
> without actually "totally taking a side," so to speak, allowing someone
> to voice an opinion, but also not requiring that person to "lay all of his
> cards down." It permits a person to half commit to a conviction without
> totally coming out. . . . People never really know how strongly a per-
> son is using it in context; therefore, people never know what to make
> of it. For this reason, the word sketchy is itself "sketchy," according to
> the definition and application it has taken on at Duke University—and
> should be used with caution.

In this new closing Justin not only offers a pointed criticism of the use of *sketchy* as a way of "half committing" yourself to an opinion but also suggests a self-reflexive

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**Intertexts:**

Justin Lee, "*Sketchy:* A Transformer of Personal Character," unpub-lished essay (2nd and 3rd drafts), Duke University, 2002.

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mode of analysis in which you apply the values of a term to itself. Is *sketchy* itself sketchy? How cool is cool? Is it shady to call someone else shady? Justin is thus doing new work until the very end of his piece, rather than simply concluding by restating what he has already said (as was the case in his first closing passage). And in doing so, he invites his readers to continue the work he has begun, to take up his approach, to write in his spirit.

You can imagine the work of revision, then, at its most ambitious, as pushing beyond the space of a single essay, as advancing a project whose ideas, aims, and possibilities spill over the bounds of a single piece and point toward further writing. That is what the first four chapters of this book are about: extending and rewriting the work of others. But you can also rewrite your own work in this interesting and difficult sense—to use one essay to fuel the next, to conclude not by wrapping things up but by pointing toward new lines of inquiry, by setting new tasks for yourself as a writer. Here's how another Duke undergraduate, Emily Murphy, put it in reflecting on her work on an essay in which she tried to connect the idea of "cultural capital," as formulated by a number of social theorists, to her own experiences in trying to reach out to people from other social classes. (These experiences included spending a number of days without money or shelter in order to gain some insight into the lives of homeless persons.)

> For some reason, I have a feeling that this is not the final draft of this paper—I imagine that I will revisit it again throughout my life. Therefore, although it is completely "revised" for now, it is doubtful that that is the final version. When the assignment was first given, I brainstormed lots of semi-related ideas, but I wasn't sure how I could connect them reasonably. I honestly did not think that I would use my homeless story in my piece, but when I told the story to my group, they became fascinated by it. I decided to write about being homeless and somehow relate it to our educational system, comparing myself with Cary and Kovacic. However, when I wrote the paper, I started discussing "cultural capital"—a term which I had previously just thrown around. I have learned about this term in several classes, but I have never truly considered the "cultural capital" of my high school. Once I started brainstorming, it was difficult to stop. I realized that I need to be specific, citing many examples. At this point, I knew that my paper could logically discuss my homeless experience in terms of "cultural capital." The paper began

to take shape. When I presented it, I realized that I needed to re-word some sentences because of my tone. I didn't want to appear that I was over-generalizing—after all, I am really just trying to discuss my own situation. Even though I tried to make this clear,

**Intertexts**

Emily Murphy, "Reflection on 'Class and Cultural Capital,'" un-published essay, Duke University, 2001.

I still feel that the paper could be easily criticized for its overgener-alization. Throughout this week, I have continued to think of more examples or semi-related topics. It was difficult for me to actually turn in the final draft because I kept on wanting to add more. Finally, my roommate looked at me and said: "You're obsessing Em, turn it in." At this point, I do like this draft. However, I also know that I will probably write a slightly different draft after my experiences student teaching this summer. This paper will follow me, hopefully expanding and alter-ing through time—it will be interesting to compare drafts. My room-mate knows me well—I do obsess.

Emily eloquently describes her essay here as "following" her, its shape and ideas shifting as she herself changes as a person and writer. But you might just as readily describe your project as a writer as something that is al-ways a few steps ahead of you—that is, as something you are always reaching *toward*, only to find, at the very point you think you have at last come to the end of work on an essay or book, that there is still more writing to be done.

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I've tried throughout this book to describe rewriting as an active and gener-ous use of the work of others, an attempt to keep the conversation going, *to add to* what other writers and intellectuals have thought and said about a subject. My aim here in this chapter has been to suggest how in revising you might look similarly at your own work-in-progress—that is, to view a draft of an essay not as something to be patched or fixed but as a starting point for new work, for further talk and writing. I've tried, that is, to offer a view of academic writing as a *social* practice, as a form of intellectual work that is always rooted in a set of ongoing conversations, and that is always looking to push such talk another step forward. Even so, I'm aware that I've said fairly little so far about the actual social context in which much of this

work takes place—that is, about the college or university writing course. In the afterword, then, I share some of my ideas about designing and teaching courses in academic writing. But while I address this section to my fellow teachers, I hope that my brief sketch of the pace and rhythm, the feel and tone, of the sort of courses I try to teach will be of interest to students as well.

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### Projects

*Reflecting on Revision*

When students in a course I am teaching are ready to turn in the final version of an essay, I also ask them to reflect on the work they have done over the last several weeks in drafting, revising, and editing their projects. Here is what I ask them to give me:

> Along with the revised and final version of your essay, I'd like you to turn in a set of materials that trace the progress of your work in writing it. These materials will take some time and care to get ready. Please submit a folder with the following materials:

> - The archival version of your essay.
> - A version of your essay on which you highlight the changes you have made in moving from your first to second draft—marking those points where you have added to, cut, shifted, reworked, or reformatted your text. You can use the "compare documents" function in Microsoft Word to do much of this work, but you are likely to find that you also need to use colored pens to mark or clarify certain kinds of changes. Include a key to reading your highlights (e.g., green for added text, blue for cuts, etc.)
> - In addition to tracking these changes, you should also identify a series of connected moves that you have made in rethinking your essay—that is, to

point to a *pattern* of revision that runs through your piece. Mark this pattern clearly. You should be able to point to at least three or four linked changes at various points in your essay and to name the idea that connects them.

- A copy of the previous drafts of your essay, along with the comments of your readers on those drafts.
- Any revising plans you have created during your work on your essay.
- A brief but specific reflection on how your project has developed over the last few weeks. Drawing on the map of changes you've made, and especially the series of moves in revision you've identified, talk about the aims and strategies that have directed your work in drafting and revising your essay. How did your project in writing evolve over time? How did you come up with and carry through on your plan for revising? What went according to plan and what surprised you? If you have the opportunity to return to this piece, what further work might you want to do on it?