

## 4 Basic Writers and Revision

*Alice Horning and Jeanie Robertson*

Students usually referred to as Basic Writers (hereafter BWs, used for both Basic Writing and Basic Writers) in a college context confront more difficulties than do well-prepared college students. For all writers, revising bears on every part of the writing process, from planning and organizing to drafting and editing. Because BWs are not strong writers to begin with, they find revising especially challenging. What they do when asked to revise is closer to editing and cleaning up than to making substantive changes to content, organization, development and related areas of their writing. Current research shows that to move beyond the focus on errors and correction, BW teachers can offer students a fuller understanding of the nature of revising and specific strategies to learn effective writing and revising, albeit at a developmental or beginning level.

The opening chapter of this volume sets up a broad definition of revising as change or modification of text, using those awarenesses and skills as writers may apply to create a finished text. Before moving to a discussion of these awarenesses and skills that professional or experienced writers bring to the revision process, a definition of BWs is in order. Any number of definitions and measures seem to describe students labeled as BWs, so the definition provided here is meant as a general guideline. The general definition will provide the framework for an exploration of BWs' revising and their need for more systematic instruction in how to revise successfully.

### DEFINING BASIC WRITERS

Defining BWs presents a significant challenge. Students may be so designated by a particular college or university based on a variety of criteria. For example, at Oakland University, a medium-sized state

university of about seventeen thousand students where most authors of this book teach, students placed in our developmental course are those whose ACT English score is at 15 or below, one kind of definition. This example is not presented because it is an exemplar of a perfect system of defining or placing BWs. Rather, it shows how BWs are commonly defined: procedurally rather than in more appropriately descriptive and substantive ways. Charles Bazerman points out that “the institutional procedures carry the theoretical baggage of the evaluative procedures—no more and no less, though they are taken as indicators of something substantive about the students as learners and writers” (Bazerman).

We chose the ACT cutoff more or less arbitrarily years ago after a study of our writing placement procedures showed that our reading of students’ impromptu writing samples did not place students any better than did the use of the ACT score. The ACT is a multiple choice test, of course, and not a direct sample of writing. So we have created several mechanisms for students to offer direct samples of their writing. These include a Placement Packet which asks students to prepare, on their own, two samples of their writing for our review in response to specific prompts; a second option is for students to present their results on the high school writing portion of Michigan’s required MEAP test (Michigan Educational Assessment of Progress, a state-wide test in most subject areas administered in 4<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades); finally students can submit their scores on either of the Advanced Placement English exams to attempt to place differently in our program. Ours is just one example of a procedural definition of BWs.

Other definitions of BWs have been presented by leading researchers in this area, such as Marilyn Sternglass. Her landmark, award-winning longitudinal study of BWs, *Time to Know Them*, examines the writing development of nine students at City College of City University of New York. As she makes clear at the outset, BWs are difficult to define as a group because so many factors affect their placement in writing programs and their abilities. They may be diverse racially and in terms of ethnic background. Some will not be native speakers of English, or they may not be speakers of Standard English (Sternglass 4–7). Some will be members of the group now described as Generation 1.5, students who may or may not have been born in the United States, who speak some other language as their native language in addition to English, and who are graduates of American high schools (Harklau).

BWs whose native language is not English have their own distinct issues with respect to revising, treated elsewhere in this volume in Chapter 5 on ESL and revising. Horning has argued elsewhere that learning to write in formal academic English is for many of these students like learning a whole new language (Horning, *Teaching*). These points provide some sense of the issues involved in defining BWs.

Probably the classic study and survey of the characteristics of BWs is Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*, published in 1977. Shaughnessy saw, from her seminal study of hundreds of placement essays of open admissions students, again at City College in New York, the range of difficulties that BWs face, including handwriting and punctuation, syntax, common errors in verb and noun forms and agreement, spelling, vocabulary, and issues of organization and development. Ultimately, Shaughnessy's book made such a huge impact on our understanding and treatment of BWs for two reasons. First, she demonstrates that BWs cannot be defined solely as writers who make lots of errors in their writing. Second, she shows that BWs must be understood as writers whose work *is* rule-governed. Shaughnessy's findings reshaped the definition of BWs significantly.

One final point about definitions of BWs comes from the recent work of Linda Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington. Like Shaughnessy, Sternglass and other scholars, they make the point that too much of the research on BWs has focused on errors and problems, treating these writers as disembodied and separated from the contexts from which they come and in which they live and work and write. This point was raised in a study of BWs in two-year and four-year institutions done by Lynn Quitman Troyka ("Defining"). In her study, Troyka found much variation in definition through an examination of BWs from differing institutions. Her study shows that those who are considered BWs changes with the context in which their writing is being evaluated. Adler-Kassner and Harrington, who also consider context pertinent to the issue of definition, suggest a more productive alternative approach:

Exploring fundamental assumptions typically carried in basic writing classes (about what students are like, what abilities they have, and how and why they interpret things as they do) raises important questions about the "commonsensical" notions about how stu-

dents in basic writing courses, and the work of those courses, should be defined. (29)

The resulting questions, they say, arise from scholars who have conceptualized BWs much more broadly and move BW to a different realm:

Taking into consideration the interaction among language, ideology, and contexts defines the work of basic writing classes and teachers differently. Here, definitions of students no longer rest on delineating and classifying problems manifest in writing. [. . .] Rather than asking what strategies can most effectively facilitate students' "fluid" movements from one discourse to another, researchers ask how basic writing classes can become sites for investigating the contexts and ideologies associated with a range of literacy practices, particularly students' and those in the academy (and even the basic writing class itself). Such questions shift attention away from trying to classify writers' (cognitive or cultural) characteristics, and reorient the work of the basic writing class toward collaborative action with teacher and student (Adler-Kassner and Harrington 30–31).

Many contemporary scholars working on BW, then, are trying hard to move the definitions away from a focus on error and toward helping writers develop their ability to probe and express their ideas effectively in writing. Consistent with this shift in focus, the use of an analysis of BWs' awarenesses and skills in revision provides broader view of who BWs are and how they might approach this work.

#### AWARENESSES AND BASIC WRITERS

*Revision Revisited* argues that revising in the very sophisticated form carried out by professional writers entails three kinds of awareness (metarhetorical, metastrategic and metalinguistic) and four kinds of skill (collaboration, genre, text and context, and tools). Professional writers, then, have metarhetorical awareness, which is the awareness of one's self as a writer, including typical strategies and approaches to writing and revising, both successful and not. This is the "I always do this and change it later" part of skilled writers' awarenesses. They know the strategies that work for them as well as the ones they use with an eye toward revision at a later time. (See Chapter 8 for fuller detail.)

Basic writers can fairly be described as lacking in metarhetorical awareness, chiefly because they are novices. Because BWs don't see

themselves as writers, this first kind of awareness has a substantial impact of their ability to revise effectively and warrants extended discussion. Experienced BW teachers are familiar with this characteristic. One of us has had students respond to discussions about writing activities with statements like “I am not a writer” or “I don’t think of myself as a writer.” The development of metarhetorical awareness comes in part from direct instruction in writing courses, but arises chiefly as a by-product of extensive writing experience, one thing most BWs lack. As early as 1981, Ann Berthoff pointed out in the *Journal of Basic Writing* that most writing instruction focuses on skills and not on awarenesses, and this claim is as true of BW instruction as it is of writing instruction in general. Her observation of a graduate student attempting to begin writing suggested to her that this writer did not “understand how writing gets written” (143); Berthoff noticed that the grad student she watched by chance seemed to have the same problem as her BWs.

Research shows clearly that BWs can develop metarhetorical awareness and that doing so leads to more substantive and more effective revising. A key study of such development, reported in 1985 by Matsuhashi and Gordon, entailed having BWs respond to several different kinds of prompts to revise their work. Instead of focusing on correctness, the experimenters asked students to make specific kinds of changes; they were told either to revise or to add five things while reading through their writing, or to list five things on the back or on a separate sheet, not looking at the text, and then to review the text to locate insertion points for the new ideas. Both of the prompts to add to the text produced significantly more changes to BWs’ content and development, particularly the prompt to add to the unseen text. BWs, then, are capable of becoming more aware of themselves as writers and can use this kind of awareness to revise in a substantive way.

A similar finding is reported in a longitudinal study done at Pepperdine University in California. While not focused on BWs, Lee Ann Carroll continues the kind of study pioneered by Marilyn Sternglass. Carroll found that the twenty students she followed through their undergraduate years used their writing portfolios to develop metarhetorical awareness. She notes that the students in the two semesters of first-year composition at Pepperdine

valued having a record of their college experience in the form of their paper and, later, digital portfolios.

These students [. . .] became more aware of their own development as they examined their own work and verbalized what they felt they were learning. Such metacognitive awareness helps promote further learning. (Carroll 123)

The students' portfolio work entails reviewing and revising work done over the whole of each semester of the course as well as adding to the portfolio writing done in other courses through their entire undergraduate careers. The use of portfolios in this way can contribute significantly to the development of metarhetorical awareness.

Portfolios and the reflective writing often requested with them, then, may not produce the kind of metarhetorical or metacognitive awareness teachers hope for in setting up such a task, especially for BWs. Laurel Bower found this problem in her study of portfolio cover letters written by BWs and reported in 2003. BWs often do not write about their writing processes but use the letter as an opportunity to complain about the course or their grades. If students have been given some direct instruction in reflective writing, Bower suggests, the letters they write for their portfolios might address issues in revision and other process matters more directly (62–63). Like other writers, then, BWs need instruction in order to develop the awarenesses and skills that expert writers have.

Some strategies for building metarhetorical awareness as well as metalinguistic awareness and use of writers' toolbox skills are described by Sandra Schor, yet another City University of New York writing teacher. In her work with BWs at Queens College, Schor moved away from ordering students to simply revise and toward having them work as professional writers do. In her use of what she calls "fastwriting" (50) and interruptions to do other kinds of writing, such as defining the terms students are using in their essays, Schor makes the case for building BWs metarhetorical and metalinguistic awarenesses. By doing separate work defining "authority" for an essay on challenging authority, she gives BWs additional material that can later be integrated into their essays. Her assignments also require BWs to focus on grammatical elements as part of the content of the task. An essay on a turning point in students' lives requires them to reflect on their situation before and after the turning point and thus requires them to focus on verb tenses as they move from past to present or more recent descriptions (Schor 53). Knowledge of the grammatical structures in-

volved raises BWs' metalinguistic awareness and may lead them to develop skill in the use of tools such as grammar handbooks.

BWs also lack a second kind of awareness found among the professional writers studied in *Revision Revisited*, metastrategic awareness (Horning). This awareness entails writers' understanding themselves as people and in terms of their personality preferences as described, for example, by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. About half of the professional writers studied in *Revision Revisited* were aware of their personality preferences and type results and used this information to build flexible strategies for writing. They knew when their writing approaches worked and when they did not, and in the latter case, were able to shift to non-preferred tactics to resolve writing problems.

BWs lack the knowledge and experience to have this metastrategic awareness. They simply have not done enough writing to have developed a sense of what approaches to writing have worked for them and which ones have not. Like most students, they are also unlikely to have had any exposure to personality type theory or to have taken the MBTI, an instrument that analyzes and reports individuals' personality preferences. While discussions of personality type preferences may not be practical for the BW classroom, an understanding of type preferences can be helpful to BW teachers, especially insofar as type preferences shape student learning styles. Knowledge of the impact of type can be very helpful in any classroom, including the BW classroom (Lawrence). In addition, the work of rhetorician George Jensen and psychologist John DiTiberio in *Personality and the Teaching of Composition* (141–53) reports on the writing and revising strategies of a variety of writers including BWs, and their findings show that BWs are diverse in terms of personality type: they do not uniformly prefer extraversion or sensing any more than do other groups of students.

While there are no specific studies on the impact of the development of type awareness among BWs, Muriel Harris' discussion of the impact of type on writing center work gives a clear indication of how helpful metastrategic awareness can be for teachers or others working with BWs, especially in tutoring. When she teaches peer tutors in training about personality type, Harris shows them that writers choose their strategies for and approaches to writing largely as a function of their type preferences. When tutoring then, or more generally, when working with BWs and others learning to write, it is important for

teachers and tutors to be aware of their own and others' metastrategic awareness and to use it in a helpful way:

This does not mean that tutors can't share their strategies with their students, but they have to do so with the awareness that such strategies may or may not help, depending on how similar the student is to them. In short, descriptions of writing strategies become suggestions, not instructions (Harris 93).

Understanding and being able to use metastrategic awareness, the awareness of personality type preferences, can be extremely helpful to BWs, since it opens up the possibility of a more flexible approach to writing and can allow them to build on strengths deriving from their preferred approaches to writing. If teachers can convey this perspective, they can change BWs' understanding about the nature of writing from "right" and "wrong" to a range of options in terms of writing and revising, moving them toward the skilled writing and revising of expert writers.

Metalinguistic awareness, an awareness of language *per se*, is a third kind of awareness found among professional writers. These writers are fully familiar with the language itself and use that knowledge of language to evaluate their writing and revise it. By contrast, as Mina Shaughnessy's study shows, BWs have little knowledge of the nature of written language. Partly of course, this lack of awareness about the nature of written language arises because BWs have little reading experience, especially with the formal written language of academic prose, as Horning has argued elsewhere ("The Connection" and "The Trouble"). The result is writing that is filled with technical errors, often severe enough to limit writers' ability to convey meaning. So, while teachers must address language conventions, current research shows that this focus is most helpfully concentrated in discussions of writers' use of the toolbox for revision, a skill discussed later in this chapter.

Other research shows that a lack of metalinguistic awareness is a significant problem in terms of BWs' revision. Much of what happens when BWs revise focuses on language *per se* is amply illustrated in Sondra Perl's 1979 study of five unskilled college writers "The Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers." Perl's report on Tony, one of the writers in the group she studied, shows that he mostly focused on editorial issues in his revisions, making 210 of his 234 changes to his texts on form, including spelling, punctuation and other linguistic issues. The changes he made, like many changes made by BWs in



editing, are attempts to create writing that is correct. A different focus that would lead to more substantive changes beyond correctness is that described by Horner and Lu as they work with non-native speakers of English (176–79). They work with BWs on metalinguistic awareness but in the context of conveying the ideas they have in mind, not just getting writing “right.” The findings on professional writers suggest that they use their metalinguistic awareness not to correct their writing but to address stylistic concerns and clarity of expression; BWs, too, need help to develop this kind of metalinguistic awareness in order to revise holistically, for substance, beyond being correct.

### SKILLS AND BASIC WRITERS

The research reported in *Revision Revisited* shows that in addition to awarenesses of themselves as writers, successful professionals also have four kinds of skills that they apply to their revising, skills with collaboration, genre, text and context and tools. These skills provide a frame through which to view the challenges BWs face when it comes to successful revision. The first of the skills of effective revision, collaboration, appears when expert writers turn to others for substantive help with their texts. The work on this chapter provides a clear example. In addition to having the second author, a highly experienced teacher of BWs, read and contribute to the text, we sent it to a respected professional who is not part of our authors’ group. This colleague has edited the *Journal of Basic Writing*; she is also an experienced BW teacher. We sent the chapter to her knowing that we would get excellent editorial help, but more importantly, substantive commentary on the content of the chapter.

BWs do not have the kind of writing experience that allows them to use substantive collaboration. As novices, they can begin to respond to the writing of others in a BW class and get reactions to their own work. This kind of classroom work is often limited, and experience shows that in both giving and receiving feedback in a collaborative framework, BWs have difficulty. Studies of BWs trying to collaborate on writing show that the kind of “collaborative action” of student and teacher advocated by Adler-Kassner and Harrington and discussed above is more successful than superficial error correction. One example of how collaboration can be demonstrated and used successfully appears in Gregory Shafer’s exploration of the use of letter writing in

a BW class. He has the students write letters to people important to them, gives them an opportunity for peer review, but then also shares a letter of his own. The resulting discussion, which Shafer guides with a series of questions focused on feelings and clarity of ideas, shifts the students' focus away from spelling and other kinds of "correction" issues and toward content and substance. In the following class session after this collaborative work, students bring

revisions [that . . . ] were the result of a vigorous, recursive, unencumbered writing process—one that allowed students to see themselves as authors in a community or club of writers, rather than as patients in a clinic for the syntactically or mechanically impaired. [ . . . T]hese students felt liberated to put expression first, treating their letters as serious drafts rather than objects for correction. (Shafer 66)

Shafer's approach demonstrates how effective collaboration builds writers' skills in revision and in addition, moves them toward the kind of metarhetorical awareness discussed above that is a key characteristic of successful professionals. It also reflects the "collaborative action" that Adler-Kassner and Harrington recommend.

A second skill of expert revisers is the ability to use a range of genres in writing and to exploit the requirements of a particular genre such as memos, research reports, or encyclopedia entries, whether chosen or assigned, to develop ideas. Whereas experts are fully familiar with a range of possible genres, using those appropriate to their discipline or profession as needed, BWs have limited knowledge of the possibilities of different genres and limited ability to use them. Partly, this weakness arises as a result of BWs' limited reading ability and experience. Partly, it arises from teaching that is not focused on demonstrating how different genres can be understood and exploited by writers. In any case, current findings show that BWs lack knowledge of and the ability to use various genres in writing.

Carroll's longitudinal study of writing development in the college years mentioned previously shows that learning about the genres appropriate to a particular area or discipline is a developmental process that BWs can begin to work on even in their first writing course (137). The students at Pepperdine University are clearly not BWs; those in Carroll's longitudinal study tend to be relatively well-prepared stu-

dents who generally have high SAT or ACT scores (the lowest SAT verbal score among her subjects was 410) and are attending a private university). However, Carroll's goal of helping students write in the genres appropriate to their discipline and their growth in ability to do so shows how important a knowledge of genre is to overall writing development for well-prepared students like those at Pepperdine as well as for BWs (137–38).

The third skill that appears among professional writers, or even among more experienced writers in college classrooms, is the skilled use of text and context. This skill entails not only an understanding of the audience, topic and purpose for a text, but also the texts within it (outside sources in a research paper, for example) and the contexts from which they arise. Here again, reading experience or lack of it plays a key role in the challenges faced by BWs. The skill of text and context requires the ability to read and understand outside source material as well as the ability to present and discuss this material in ways that are appropriate for the audience to which the writing is addressed.

Nancy Sommers' work in two reports published in the early 1980s shows that BWs differ from experienced writers in that they lack the knowledge of text and context that might lead to successful, substantive revision. Sommers' two studies comparing and contrasting BWs and expert writers both show that the experts have a rich view of revising as a by-product of writers' ability to place a text in a context suited to a particular audience. The revisions that expert writers make to texts go far beyond changes in wording and sentence structure typically made by novice writers. This finding supports the notion that all BW courses might usefully incorporate extensive reading experience and audience analysis to help BWs develop some skills in the use of text and context.

The final skill described and discussed in *Revision Revisited* is skill in the use of a variety of tools that experts have in their "toolboxes" for writing. Professional writers know about an array of tools that help them write efficiently and effectively: computer-based word processing and all the online tools that come with it (online dictionaries, spelling and grammar checkers and so on), along with such tools as style or grammar handbooks, thesauruses, and pre-writing templates like webbing or cubing. These tools are available to BWs as well, though a lack of knowledge or experience limits their use.

Studies show that direct instruction in the use of the toolbox can be helpful. An early study supporting this claim was reported by Saur at the Basic Writing Conference in 1985. She found that using reading and collaborative rereading and rewriting of texts can be useful to BWs as can brainstorming to develop content. Such techniques are part of the essential toolbox for revision that can be useful to BWs. Similarly, Ann Berthoff's suggested use of dialogue journals offers yet another tool for BWs to see revision as a complex process that has a role in all parts of writing, not just at the end of the process.

Mary Moran's 1997 study published in the *Journal of Basic Writing* found that BWs who were stronger readers did a better job with revising if they worked on their texts by reading them aloud (Moran 86–88). This is consistent with the strategy of one of the various pieces of support for the importance of the toolbox in revising for BWs, just as it is for professional writers. The toolbox skill is the one place where a focus on error is appropriate, but the research with professionals shows that they use the toolbox with a focus on clarity and eliminating distractions for readers. BW teachers can help students become more skilled with the toolbox if they can keep this focus in their teaching as well.

#### A “PIVOTAL MOMENT:” SOME SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is much to be done to help BWs learn to revise their writing successfully. We hope it is clear from this brief discussion that not nearly enough research has focused on helping BWs develop the awarenesses and skills essential to effective revision. Indeed, BW scholarship is at what Gene Wise calls a “pivotal moment” (qtd. in Adler-Kassner, “Structure” 229) where pedagogies, strategies, and structures can begin to take into account the contextual changes in student populations and the significance that real life experiences have for learning and for student writing. But in doing so, it will be essential for this scholarship to look explicitly at every aspect of the writing process, including revising.

In response to her reading of this chapter, Catherine Haar, one of the other authors of this volume, shared a set of BW papers with us. These papers had been written, submitted to Ms. Haar, and revised. With their revisions, the students were asked to write “revision notes”

in which they explained to their teacher how they had tried to change their papers. The teacher comments and student notes are quite instructive. Ms. Haar's initial comments address the students' relative success in conveying their ideas and feelings about topics they chose, related to their experiences as adolescents (dealing with such matters as personal experience with teen pregnancy, important teachers, positive work experiences, and so on). In response, the students' revision notes include commentary not only on their attempts to make their writing more correct by fixing their mistakes, but especially on their attempts to develop their ideas and convey their points by additions, rearrangements and other changes that constitute substantive revision. The point here is that careful, thoughtful teaching that encourages BW students to develop awarenesses as well as skills and that goes beyond correction can make a significant difference in BWs' ability to revise substantively and successfully.

In 2000, Lynn Quitman Troyka, a leader in Rhetoric and Composition Studies and especially in BW, wrote an open letter to George Otte and Trudy Smoke, then the editors of the *Journal of Basic Writing*, which they published in the journal. The piece was called "How We Have Failed the Basic Writing Enterprise." In her letter, Troyka notes that we have failed to help BWs in part through a lack of research on how best to teach them to write well. This claim certainly applies to the teaching of revising for BWs. In preparing this chapter, both of the authors have looked carefully through the literature and found little focused research on the teaching of revising for BWs. We have tried to show that like all other student writers, BWs need to develop the awarenesses and skills that are evident when professionals revise. The challenge now is to develop a broader array of proven, effective techniques, a few of which we have described in this chapter, for doing so.