

Nancy Sommers

## INTENTIONS AND REVISIONS

Outside the writing classroom, the word *revision* suggests a process of change, one of re-seeing and re-conceptualizing. In the writing classroom, however, revision is treated as a non-creative act, a polishing act concerned with taking the linguistic litter out of sentences. Revision in the writing class is as interesting as an autopsy. This is so, I suspect, because in the pre-dominant model of writing—the pre-writing, writing, rewriting model—we have identified prewriting as the creative stage of the composing process. We have reasoned that our students' compositions lack thought; therefore, we need to direct our exercises to the thinking stage of the process: pre-writing. The re-writing stage is taught as the repetition of writing, simply the fine-tuning of what is already there, bringing to perfection the “pre-conceived” product.

But as Kenneth Burke has remarked, “A way of seeing is also a way of not seeing.” What we have not seen about the composing process is that although the linear pre-writing, writing, rewriting model might provide a pedagogical convenience by breaking a complex process into a series of discrete temporal stages, it is not an accurate model of how any writer composes. In our haste to discuss the composing process, we have not developed the necessary vocabulary. Rather, we have attempted to fit our interpretation of the composing process to an inadequate vocabulary.

Current research on the composing process suggests that a writer is simultaneously forced into a multiplicity of roles—reader, discoverer, critic—as ideas are selected, evaluated, and organized. Since we cannot tell where one “stage” of the composing process begins or ends, a more

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accurate understanding of the composing process is a recursive one.<sup>1</sup> This simply means that the composing process is characterized by significant recurring patterns and the repetition of the same subprocesses throughout the writing process. Processes, such as revision, occur throughout the writing of a work. Thus, revision is more usefully viewed not as a stage at the end of the process, but rather as a process of making changes—changing the work to make it congruent with a writer's changing intentions.

An important value of a recursive model is that it focuses attention on the connection between a writer's intentions and the writer's revisions. A recursive understanding of the composing process opens up new territory and allows us to ask, as Linda Flower has, what is the relation between the revising process and the planning process that has preceded it? If revision is making a text congruent with a writer's changing intentions, then to understand the revision process, we need to understand how writers evaluate the extent to which the written text accomplishes their intentions. We need to understand what criteria writers use in planning their texts that they can later use to evaluate whether the text has accomplished what they planned to do.

These issues are important to composition teachers who demand revisions from their students, but who know revision to be one of the most frustrating aspects of teaching composition. Our students' papers come back with some changes—minor word and phrase substitutions, some grammatical constructions either less or more awkward—but often the quality and structure of the students' work either has not improved, or even worse, the revised drafts are inferior to the previous drafts.

For the past three years I have been studying the revision processes of unskilled college freshmen who have had at least one semester of freshmen composition and of skilled adult writers. One conclusion of my work has been that the major difference between unskilled and skilled writers is the way they evaluate and revise their own writing.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I would like to focus attention on two representative writers whom I have studied: Rita, a second semester freshman with a 500 SAT verbal

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<sup>1</sup>See Janet Emig, *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*, NCTE Research Report No. 13 (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1971); Linda Flower and J.R. Hayes, "The Cognition of Discovery," *CCC*, 30 (February, 1979), 46-49; Ellen Nold, "Revising," unpublished paper; Sondra Perl, "Understanding Composing," *CCC*, 31 (December, 1980), 363-369.

<sup>2</sup>For an extended discussion of this research see Nancy Sommers, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," *CCC*, 31 (December, 1980), 378-388.

score, and one semester of freshman composition behind her; and Walter, a published writer, and instructor of expository and creative writing. The writing topic given to Rita and Walter was: "Write an article for *Parent* magazine in which you explain what you believe to be the biggest mistake (or mistakes) parents make in raising their children." In this article, I examine how Rita and Walter revised their introductions because these revisions illustrate not only how Rita and Walter evaluate the extent to which their texts accomplish their intentions, but also the fundamental differences between the revision strategies of unskilled and skilled writers.

### **Rita**

Rita began this writing with little hesitation. She re-read the writing topic a few times and then stated: "Let's see, the biggest mistakes parents make is being domineering parents." She then brainstormed, asking herself, "What do I know about domineering parents?" After five minutes she formalized her thesis statement: "Domineering parents cause their children to become overly dependent on others and lack the ability to develop an individual character or personality."

With her thesis statement formulated, Rita started writing her introductory paragraph. Rita wrote six versions of her introductory paragraph, crossing out the first four versions after she wrote them, and saying, "No, this isn't what I want to say at all." The following are Rita's six versions of her introductory paragraph:

1. "Most parents instinctively want the best for their children. This instinct is the primary basis for the way they raise their children."

2. "Most parents have a general instinct towards their children; they want what's best for them. This instinct is the primary basis for the way parents raise their children. But, of course, not all parents' methods of raising children are the same. Each method coincides with the individual characteristics of the parents."

3. "Most parents have a general instinct towards their children; they want what's best for them. This instinct is the primary basis for the way parents raise their children. But, of course, not all parents use the same methods when raising their children."

4. "Most parents have a general instinct towards their children; they want what's best for them. This instinct is the primary basis for the way parents raise their children. But, of course, all parents have different interpretations of what's best for their children. And these interpretations usually coincide with the characteristics of the individual parents. This leads to numerous categories that parents can fall under. For example, strict parents."

5. "Most parents have a general instinct towards their children; they want

what's best for them. This instinct is the primary basis for the way parents raise their children. But, of course, all parents have different interpretations as to what's best for their children. Some parents can be categorized as extremists. These are the parents who make the mistake of being too lenient, too strict, or too forceful. But the most damaging parental extremists are the domineering parents. They cause their children to become overly dependent upon others and lack the ability to develop an individual character or personality.

6. "Most parents have a general instinct towards their children; they want what is best for them. This instinct is the primary basis for the way parents raise their children. But, of course all parents have different interpretations of what's best for their children. [For example, some parents are the carefree type who feel it's best to stay on an even level with their children throughout their development.] [Then there are the athletic types who believe a happy child is a physically active child.] [More on the negative side] are the parents categorized as extremists. These are the parents who are too strict or too lenient, [too pushy and too passive, and those parents tend to have damaging psychological effects on a child.] The most detrimental extremists are the domineering parents. Children raised by domineering parents are usually overly dependent on others and lack the ability to develop an individual character or personality."

On her fifth attempt, Rita wrote an introductory paragraph that satisfied her enough so that she continued to write the article. As she had been taught, she took the topic sentence for her second and third paragraphs directly from her thesis statement. The topic sentence for her second paragraph was: "A child with domineering parents tends to be overly dependent on others." And the topic sentence for her third paragraph was: "A child raised by domineering parents is also unable to create a unique personality and be an independent being." Even so, with the formula given her, Rita became stuck in the middle of the second and third paragraphs since she needed examples to support her topic sentences. Finally, she became stuck writing the concluding paragraph because she had been taught that "conclusions merely restate introductions, but in different words." She had already had trouble writing her introduction, straining her vocabulary to find adequate synonyms for the phrase "domineering parents." Rita waited ten minutes after finishing her first draft and then rewrote the entire article. Version six is her introductory paragraph for her second draft. The major additions in this final version, compared to version five, are enclosed in brackets.

What were Rita's intentions? She intended to write an article addressing the topic according to the rules she had been taught for essay

writing: formulate a thesis statement, then use words from the thesis statement as keywords in the topic sentences. If she had two elements in her thesis statement, then she would write a four paragraph essay, but better yet, if she could think of three elements in her thesis statement, then she would write a five paragraph essay. From the beginning, Rita was mainly concerned with applying the *rules* she had learned. This is the major reason she became stuck in writing her introductory paragraph. She had to apply the rules carefully to each sentence as it was written. This job, together with the need to direct the evolution of the whole article in the first few sentences, temporarily overwhelmed her. In fact, the first five versions of the introductory paragraph consumed forty minutes—a disproportionate one third of her composing time.

If we compare versions five and six of Rita's introductory paragraph, we see that she made a number of changes. Rita stated that she added the first two bracketed sentences in version six because she had been criticized by her composition teacher on two accounts: first, for writing introductions that were too brief, and second, for not supplying enough examples in her writing. Rita collapsed these two criticisms into the simple rule "more is better" and revised her introduction by giving more examples of parental extremes. When ten independent evaluators judged Rita's two drafts, they judged the revised draft with version six as an introduction to be inferior to the original draft with version five. The evaluators agreed that in the context of the whole essay the revised introduction was inferior because the added examples of carefree parents and athletic parents took Rita farther away from the point she was trying to make. She weakened the force of her introduction by adding a poor transitional phrase, "more on the negative side," and the unnecessary repetitious phrase, "these parents tend to have damaging psychological effects on a child." By pushing too hard to make her writing specific, Rita did just the opposite, and made her introduction less specific. According to the evaluators who judged Rita's essay, in this case, more was *not* better.

This example illustrates one of the major revision strategies of unskilled writers: obeying rules. Unskilled writers understand writing as a set of techniques and follow the rules even when some of them are not appropriate for the specific text they are creating. The problem is that writing is never abstract, but rules always are. Rita's choice and application of a rigid four paragraph essay format can be viewed as an attempt to find comfort in rules applicable to an overall text. *In general, unskilled writers will subordinate the demands of the specific problems of their text to the demands of the rules.* Changes are made in compliance

with abstract rules about the product, in Rita's case, rules that do not apply to the specific problems in her text.

Furthermore, since there is no one rule which governs the writing and revising of an entire text, unskilled writers are stuck with revising word by word, sentence by sentence, rule by rule. The "tyranny of the shoulds" dictates to unskilled writers what they should or should not do when revising. Significantly, Rita occasionally worried when writing her article whether she had written something irrelevant or something that did not connect. These concerns develop for unskilled writers when attention is narrowly focused on rules rather than on referring them to larger goals for the whole piece of writing.

### **Walter**

Walter did not immediately begin writing his introduction with a fully developed thesis statement like Rita did, but rather began by thinking about examples of parents he had known—one set of parents in particular who had four children with wrecked lives, although the parents were among the most respected people in the community. Walter decided to start his article with an anecdote about this family. The following are the introductory paragraphs Walter wrote for drafts one and two of his article:

1. "They lived on Maple Street, in an Upstate New York village, this beautiful family of four. He was a professor of history in the local college, and she was very active in the community, including work with liberal political groups. They had four beautiful children—Anne, Robert, Callie, Meg. [Meg played the cello, Callie the viola, Anne the piano, and Robert played basketball on the high school varsity.] They were a family that looked like it had come directly out of the pages of *The Saturday Evening Post*: Dad puffing on his pipe, Mother thin and attractive, and the four children blonde and beautiful. More than one parent in our village pointed to the Smiths as an example of a happy couple, and a happy family. When things started being less than ideal for the children, we credited it to "bad luck"—the Smiths, that was their name, their being so ideal, had such a hold on our minds we couldn't conceive of problems in their family being anything but the working of cruel fate."

2. "They were a family right out of *The Saturday Evening Post*, this family of six, and in that upstate New York village, they were looked up to, even admired. He was a pipe smoking history professor who talked of liberal politics, of humanism, and of the importance of social commitment—all of course spiced with light irony which we thought he might have picked up at Harvard where he had taken his degree. She was a vigorous,

attractive woman with a very good mind. She was committed and active in the anti-war and anti-proliferation movements and, with another woman, worked four years to fund and establish a half-way house for delinquent boys. Both of them were key members of the Unitarian Fellowship, both vigorously discussed human development—using words from Erickson, from Rollo May, from Carl Rogers—and together they were known in the Village as concerned, loving parents of their four beautiful blonde children. When things started being less than ideal for their children, we credited it to “bad luck.” The Smiths, that was their name, had such a hold on our minds that we could hardly conceive of problems with their children being anything but the working of cruel fate.”

In the middle of writing his first draft, Walter realized that the central idea that he wanted to express in his article was that many parents allow ideas about child rearing to become substitutes for living mutual relationships. He subsequently realized what he had not originally realized when he wrote the anecdote—that the problem with the Smiths (the family in the opening anecdote) was that their ideas, while all good ideas, created a terrible absence at the heart of the family. Walter realized that the point he wanted to make with the opening anecdote was that the Smith children were raised by clusters of ideas, not by their parents. Although Walter discovered this central idea in the middle of writing his first draft, he decided to push all the way through to the end of the piece before revising the opening anecdote so that he could have some kind of frame or structure to think in terms of for revising.

Walter explained the essential difference between draft one and draft two this way: “I didn’t know the idea before I started to write. I knew that these were parents who epitomized what I thought were the major dangers of raising children, but I wasn’t sure how they did, or why they did, or even why I really thought so.” In writing the introduction of draft one, Walter bracketed the information about the children playing musical instruments, but waited to revise his introduction until he understood the structure of his article. The detail about the children playing musical instruments, which he originally thought would be a “nice bourgeois detail” to add, was rejected when he revised because he realized that he was not trying to make the point that the Smith family was *Saturday Evening Post* quaint (the tone of the anecdote in the first draft), but rather that this was a family who lived in a world of ideas. He added various examples of the Smiths’ commitment to liberal ideas and social causes to make the opening anecdote consistent with the specific meaning and structure that emerged in writing the draft. Meaning was not what Walter started out

with, but something he discovered. Revision allowed the meaning of Walter's text, how and why the Smith family epitomized the dangers of raising children, to become clear. This is the recursive aspect of revision, a process which needs constant reference to its ends. As a more detailed understanding of his intention and his meaning emerged, Walter attempted to make his text congruent with his intentions by integrating the parts and the whole.

Walter began with a plan—write from personal experience and put that experience into the form of an anecdote that would provide a context with which both the reader and writer could identify. As Walter attempted to connect his anecdote to the world of his reader, he began to see that the anecdote, which began as a simple example, could be revised to be more effectively integrated with the meaning that emerged, and that, in fact, the anecdote could structure subsequent parts of his article. For Walter, finding a structure was a strategy for finding meaning—structure was both a heuristic and communicative device. Walter found his structure by linking the inner elements of his text and, in so doing, selected and shaped his meaning. For Rita, however, the rules made it impossible for her to discover meaning; her thesis statement was her meaning. What Rita assumed was that the meaning to be communicated was already there, already produced once she formulated her thesis statement, and all that she needed to do was follow a formulaic four or five paragraph essay form and stuff her “meaning” into her paragraphs. For Rita, structure did not develop—it was a given.

Walter used different aspects of his opening anecdote as a cohesive device to make his text hang together, thereby reinforcing his meaning at different points in his article. But, to unskilled writers like Rita, who do not look at the whole text, the cohesive devices which Walter used merely suggest repetition, and repetition is always a negative quality. Rather than exploiting repetition as a strategy for cohesion, unskilled writers follow the rule “never repeat.” When unskilled writers see that they have repeated the same word or phrase too often, they eliminate the repetition either by substituting other words or deleting the words. Most important, repetition inspires this sort of revision without any reference to the larger purposes of composition. The unskilled writers reword their sentences to avoid repetition, thus solving the immediate problem, but blinding themselves to the larger conceptual problem, the fact that although they are using different words, they are merely restating the same idea, not developing it.

What we learn from Walter, and from other skilled writers, is that it is impossible to revise a text without understanding of the *purpose* of the



different parts and how they fit with the whole; a writer's sense of the whole writing both precedes and grows out of an examination of the parts. The changes unskilled writers make are made at the great risk of producing revisions inferior to their original drafts. This happens because unskilled writers follow rigid rules—rules which in the abstract no one would disagree with—but without understanding the reasoning behind the rules. Without a sense of what the rules are for, unskilled writers apply them in a consistent way, lacking any sense of the relation of those rules to the larger goals and processes that achieve and, to some extent, define the specific piece of writing.

What we also learn from Walter, and from other skilled writers, is how very important the relation is between discovering a structure and discovering meaning. We tell our students: Be correct! Be concise! Be concrete! But above all: Discover! Yet we rob our students of this important part of the discovery process—this discovery of structure—by forcing them to write formulaic five paragraph essays. We impose rigid structures upon students at the risk of turning out terribly mechanical writing like Rita produced, for a fixed structure often inhibits the discovery of ideas and, therefore, the process of significant revision. If we can teach our students the logic of a paragraph, then we can have the confidence to allow them to discover their own structure to match the meaning of what they have to say. Every student has something to say, but not every student knows how to say whatever she or he has to say in a rigid five paragraph essay complete with topic sentences. What we have not realized in our composition pedagogy is that the structure of an essay is a very sophisticated form of discourse and that there are numerous forms of writing to teach our students besides the formulaic essay.

The problem in teaching writing is that writing is never abstract and rules always are. What is needed is a series of procedures formulated in relation to students' goals that would give students a more specific sense of the purpose of their writing and the means to achieve (and modify) that purpose. The rules we are offered now—and the necessary attention to detail they force us as teachers to take—are so abstract that they are often mistaken for ends in themselves. The rules that we teach in composition classes foster the assumptions that writing and successfully communicated thought are indistinguishable and that this writing or communication of thought is completely separate from the procedures of revision, which simply correct local mistakes, add "style," and seek to find other words. What they encourage is the constant though necessary danger of rules as such: the confusion of ends and means.