

# Four Principles Toward Teaching the Craft of Revision

BY MARK FARRINGTON

*The beautiful part of writing is that you don't have to get it right the first time, unlike, say, a brain surgeon.*

—Robert Cormier

*Good writing is essentially revision. I am positive of this.*

—Roald Dahl

I consider myself a professional writer. Not because I earn a living writing; I could just about buy a cup of coffee every morning with what my writing has earned—provided I went to 7-11 and not Starbucks. I consider myself a professional writer because I write to publish. For me, a piece isn't truly finished until it's published.

When writing to publish, considerations change. For one thing, the work's "grade" is either A or F. (Or, more gently, P for published or NY for Not Yet.) The writer's standards toughen (an editor will usually consider a piece only once, and I don't want my work rejected based on something I could have fixed before submitting). Most of all, a writer who writes to publish comes to understand the enormous importance of revision. Years may pass between a first draft and publication. Over that time, everything done to a piece of writing is revision.

Many well-known writers are quick to point out how much they love revision:

*Revision is one of the pleasures of writing. I love the flowers of after-thought.*

—Bernard Malamud

*The best part of all, the absolutely most delicious part, is finishing it and*

*then doing it over. That's the thrill of a lifetime for me. . . . I rewrite a lot, over and over again, so that it looks like I never did it. I try to make it look like I never touched it, and that takes a lot of time and a lot of sweat.*

—Toni Morrison

*The pleasure IS the rewriting. The first sentence can't be written until the final sentence is written.*

—Joyce Carol Oates

As teachers of writing, most of us do understand the value of revision. But that understanding doesn't always make it easier to teach revision to our students. Teaching revision is hard. And recognizing how important revision is to professional writers can make us feel especially frustrated when we struggle trying to teach it to our students.

To understand how best to teach revision, we must begin by looking at how we as writers use revision. I asked a group of teachers in the Northern Virginia Writing Project Summer Institute to think first about a piece of writing they had chosen to revise and one they had chosen not to revise. Why, I asked, did they decide to revise the first and decided once was enough with the next?

The responses I got to the first part of the question didn't surprise me. All the teachers said they chose to revise writings they cared about; they wanted to put in the extra work to make the writing better. After discussion, they also admitted that they knew right off that the piece was good. And when they thought about revision, they had a plan to follow. They would put it away for a while and read it later, or show it to a

reading/writing group, or read it aloud, or do some reflective writing.

Their response to the question about writing they'd chosen not to revise offered some surprises. I had expected everyone to say, "my grocery list," but they were, instead, refreshingly candid. Several admitted they had done little or no revision on papers they'd written in college. Why not? I asked. Not enough time was the first reply. Then one teacher admitted, "I didn't care about the topic. I wasn't writing the paper for myself, I was writing it for my professor. And I knew, for him, one draft would be good enough."

These responses suggest the following principles about revision. Revision works best when:

## **1. The writer believes there is some good in the original piece.**

For example, when I finished a first draft of a novel, I sent it to a friend, a writer whose opinions I respect greatly. He said, "There are two sections, one of 30 pages, the other of 40 pages, that are definitely the best writing you've ever done, and are, I think, among the best writing I've ever read."

That writer did not speak so glowingly about the other 240 pages of my manuscript, but that was okay. I saw those 70 pages as the foundation to build on. In a sense, I had a responsibility to them, because they were so good. I worked intermittently for five years on that novel, trying to get the rest of the book up to the quality of those 70 pages.

If the writer believes there's nothing good in the piece, the trash basket is the only place

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he or she will want to put it. However, if the writer believes there is some good, he or she might just want to work a little harder.

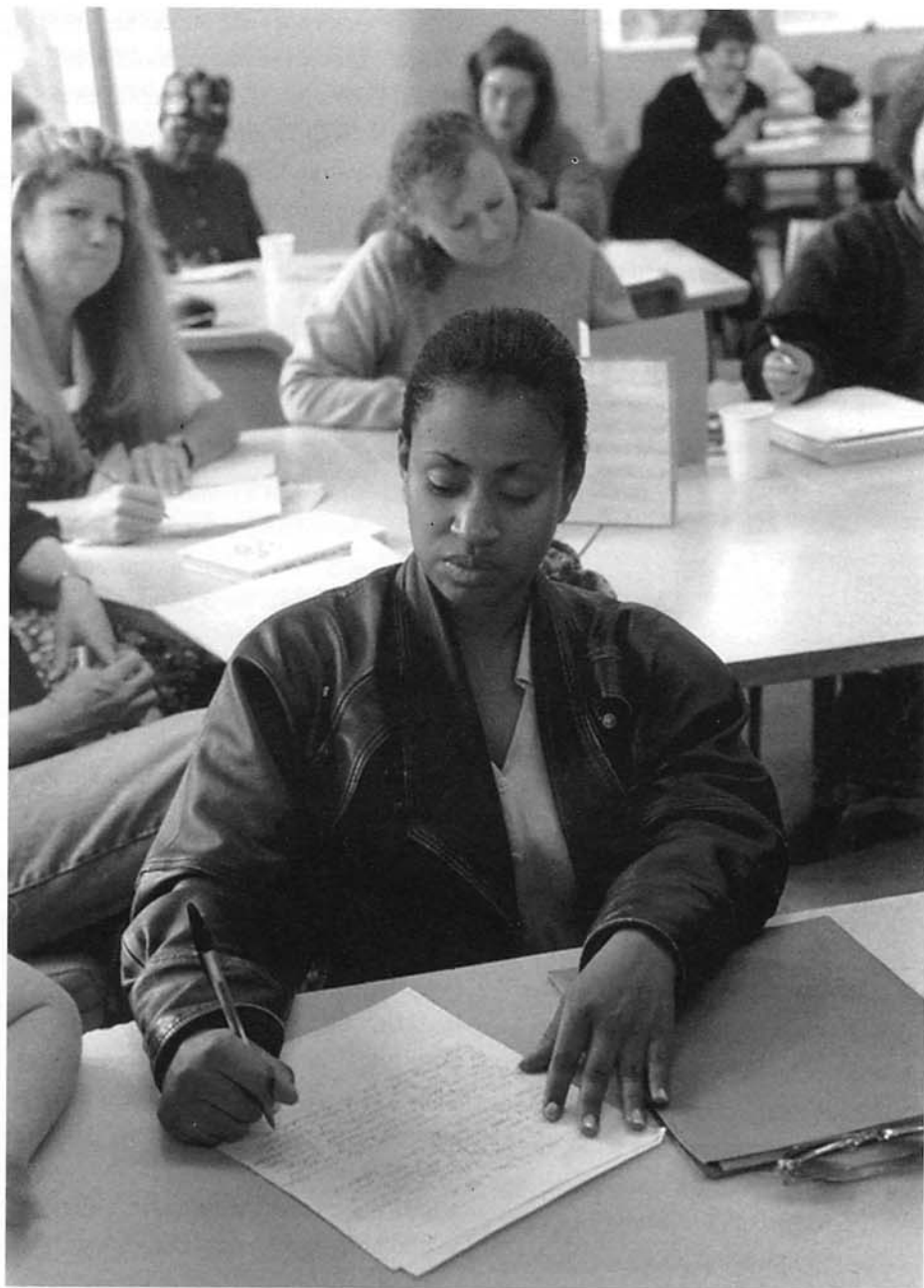
### **2. The writer believes the writing can be made better.**

A writer who believes a piece is perfect, or at least beyond the writer's ability to improve, is not ready to revise. Sometimes all the writer needs is a little time away from the piece, more distance. I tell graduate fiction-writing students that if they feel a story is as good as they can possibly make it, they should send it out to publishers. It might be accepted, but if it's not, time will have passed, enabling the writer to now look at the story more freshly.

Providing time in the classroom is harder, but portfolios allow students to achieve some distance from a piece. At least there's a better chance students will start revising closer to the time they are ready to revise. Without that time, the task falls to a peer or teacher to convince the writer that the piece can be better. Small groups or even whole-class workshops are best for this. Hearing four or 24 voices saying similar things carries weight. When the suggestions must come from the teacher, the role that teacher has chosen to play becomes paramount. Is the teacher judge or helper? Students are much more apt to listen to a teacher they view as someone who genuinely wants to help with improving a piece of writing.

### **3. The writer has some reason to make it better.**

Whether it be pride, a grade, or publication, revision is hard work, and everyone needs a reason to do it. Sometimes that reason



might be practice. Teaching revision sometimes means practicing the techniques of revision. Exercises like “write the beginning of your story from a different point of view, just to see if you can do it” or

“find a place other than the first sentence where this essay might begin,” are valuable because they show student writers the possibilities that exist in writing. Writing is flexible and alive, and most often the result

of decisions the writer has made, consciously or not. Realizing that they have the power to go back and change decisions, and witnessing the consequences of those changes is a valuable experience for all writers to have.

Practice can sometimes turn to play. Ask students to:

- add five colors
- add four action verbs
- add three sensory details
- add two transitional words or phrases
- add one metaphor

If students can't do this with their own work, have them exchange pieces and try.

In my fiction writing class, I have students choose a spot in the story where the main character does something that is crucial to the rest of the story. At that moment, I tell them, you must make the character do the exact opposite.

The first time I tried this, one of my students noisily agonized all through the exercise. When he finished I asked, "What happened?" "I couldn't do it," he replied. He explained that he had chosen the moment when the main character climbed over a wall. "What he discovers on the other side of the wall sets the whole story in motion," my student protested. "If he doesn't climb over the wall, there's no story."

"I didn't say he couldn't climb over the wall," I told him. "I said that in the moment at which he now climbs over the wall, he has

to do the exact opposite. So let's see. Instead of climbing over the wall, he looks at it and thinks, There's no way I'm climbing over that stupid wall. He turns his back and walks away from it. But he feels something pulling at him, something he can't explain; it's even a little frightening. It's as if something on the other side of the wall is calling out to him. 'Hell,' he says, and feeling foolish, he runs up and climbs over the wall."

What happened in revision? The pace of the story has slowed, at a moment when it probably should have slowed. The act of climbing over the wall has become more significant, both for the reader and the main character. And we've learned a little bit about the main character we wouldn't have known had he simply come upon the wall and climbed over.

Playing at revision can often bring these kind of surprises. When they come, revision doesn't seem such hard work anymore.

#### **4. The writer has some plan for figuring out how to make it better.**

I may know the piece can be improved and want very badly to improve it, but if I don't know how to go about doing that I'll be frustrated and lost. At this point the teacher's role may become critical. The solution here is to teach techniques of revision and provide reading/writing groups and teacher comments that will help the writer learn how to improve the writing.

When these four principles exist, revision works best. One responsibility of the teacher, then, is to try to create ways for these four principles to be present as often as possible for student writers. And, conversely, not to expect substantial revision when they are not there. Not everything needs to be revised, but a writer—professional or student—who knows he or she has written something of value, who cares about writing it well, who believes it can be better, and who has the knowledge, tools, and resources to figure out how—such a writer is ready to fall in love with the craft of revision.

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