

# REVISION

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I will begin this evening by telling you how I became interested in studying the revision strategies of student writers. Possibly my experience, or more accurately my frustration, in teaching revision is consistent with some of your experiences. I found that I would assign revisions, the students would grudgingly revise, their essays would be returned to me, and rather than seeing the type of significant improvements I had expected — or why else assign revision (I reasoned to myself) — I would find minor changes: word and phrase substitutions, some grammatical constructions less awkward, but some, in fact, more awkward. The content and structure of my students' work had not improved in any dramatic way; in fact, the revised drafts were less interesting even if they were more correct. In short, the revised drafts were often quite inferior to the original drafts.

My students did not see revision as an opportunity for discovery, rather they saw it as another teacher-imposed burden — a punishment for not getting it right the first time. No matter how much I talked about re-vision as re-seeing, my students still saw it as a dull, noncreative process, as interesting, perhaps, as an autopsy.

It was clear to me that my students and I had different conceptions about the nature and the value of revising. Thus, I decided to study the revision strategies of students in order to understand what students do when they revise, what their major concerns are when revising, and what assumptions they have about the composing process that influence their revising strategies. Over the past five years, using a case study methodology, I have studied the revising strategies of 30 college freshmen, 15 high school seniors,

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and 10 experienced adult writers. My work is just beginning, but what I want to report on tonight are the major findings and patterns of this research and of a companion study I did last year trying to understand what kind of response and comments help students to revise.

Revision is usually defined as the third stage of the composing process — there is prewriting, writing, and then re-writing — and whatever it is that goes on during those first two stages, we assume that rewriting is a separate stage both temporally and qualitatively from prewriting and writing. Most composition textbooks give us the impression that rewriting is just the repetition of writing, simply the further growth of what is already there. Or some textbook authors tell us that revision is a cleaning up act: the verbs that are used synonymously with revising are associated with cleanliness — to revise is to groom, to polish, to order, to tidy-up one's writing; the message communicated to students is that revision is the act of cleaning prose of all its linguistic litter.

For the purposes of my research, I redefined revision because I believe it is more usefully viewed not as a stage at the end of the composing process, but rather as a process that occurs throughout composing, a process of making changes throughout the writing of every draft, changes that work to make the draft congruent with a writer's changing intentions. As new ideas emerge, the act of revision is an attempt to make one's writing consonant with that changing vision.

But students seem to understand revision from the simple word and sentence levels only. Their notions of revision underscore those of traditional composition texts, a cosmetic preparation of final prose. Below are five quite typical definitions of revision as described by student writers:

*Scratch Out and Do Over Again:* "I say scratch out and do over, and that means what it says. I read what I have written and I cross out a word and put another word in; a more decent word or better word. Then if there is somewhere to use a sentence that I have crossed out, I will put it there."

*Slashing and Throwing Out:* "I throw things out and say they are not good. I like to write like Fitzgerald did by inspiration, and if I feel inspired then I don't need to slash and throw much out."

*Marking Out:* "I don't use the word rewriting because

I only write one draft and the changes I make are made on top of the draft. The changes I make are usually marking out words and putting new words in."

*Reviewing:* "I just review every word and make sure that everything is worded right. I see if I am rambling; I see if I can put a better word in or leave one out. Usually when I read what I have written, I say to myself, 'that word is so bland or so trite,' and then I go and get my thesaurus."

*Redoing:* "Redoing means just using better words and eliminating words that are not needed. I go over and change words around."

As you can see from the definitions, the common primary concern linking all the definitions of revision and the revision strategies of these students is their predominant emphasis upon *VOCABULARY*. The students understand the revision process as a rewording activity. They do so because they see *WORDS* as the unit of written discourse. They concentrate on particular words apart from their role in the text. Words, students assume, bear meaning, and they assume that words communicate by themselves, that words are finished and interchangeable. Similar to the 18th century theory of words parodied in *Gulliver's Travels*, students imagine language as a load of things (words) carried around to be exchanged.

The students seem to place a symbolic importance on their selection and rejection of words as the determiners of success or failure for their compositions. The dominant questions the students ask when making changes are: Can I find a better word or phrase? A more impressive, not so clichéd, or less hum-drum word? Am I repeating the same word or phrase too often? In this way the students approach revision with what could be labeled as a Thesaurus Philosophy of Writing. They see the thesaurus as a harvest of lexical substitutions and believe that if there is a problem in their essay it can be solved by rewording. The use of the thesaurus in student writing quite often calls attention to itself as loudly as a tuba in a string quartet. A student in my writing class last year replaced the sentence, "Children love junk food" with the sentence "Children never eschew surrogate commestibles."

Student dependence on the thesaurus reveals a govern-

ing assumption that the students hold about revising — that the meaning to be communicated is already there, already produced, already finished, and all that is necessary is a better word. This is why individual words are so centrally focused upon in students' revising. Individual words, students assume, always bear the burden of communication. In turn communication, as students implicitly conceive of it, simply passes on information in an unproblematic way — “junk food” is inappropriate slang, their logic suggests, but “surrogate commestibles” communicates the same thought in better words.

Most students have not been trained to see that revision can also put things together, create new perspectives, in a word *COMPOSE*. As one student told me, “I call revision Re-doing, and re-doing means just using better words and eliminating words that are not needed.” What this implies is that what is needed is already known; there is nothing to be discovered, only something to be repeated in better words. The assumption here is that writing is translating, the thought to the page, the language of speech to the more formal language of prose, the word to its synonym. Whatever is translated, an original text already exists for students, one which need not be discovered or acted upon, but simply communicated.

Thus, students think of revision as a process of changing words, but not changing ideas. Many students use the word *INSPIRATION* to describe the ease or difficulty with which their essay is written, and the extent to which it needs to be revised. If students feel inspired, if the writing comes easily, and if they don't get stuck on individual words or phrases, then they say that they cannot see any reason to revise. Because they do not see revision as a process in which they can modify and develop perspectives and ideas, they feel that if they know what they want to say, then there is little reason for making revisions.

The only modification of ideas in the students' essays I studied occurred when they tried out two or three introductory paragraphs — and in fact, most changes students make are in the writing and rewriting of their introductions. I have noticed that students who have been taught to use a thesis statement as a controlling device in their introductory paragraphs try to write their introductions and their thesis statements even before they have really discovered what they want to say. Because students don't revise their thesis, these

statements function to restrict and circumscribe not only the development of their ideas, but also their ability to change the direction of these ideas.

Too often as composition teachers we conclude that students do not willingly revise. The evidence from my research suggests that it is not that students are unwilling to revise, but rather that they do what they have been taught to do in a consistently narrow and predictable way. On every occasion when I asked students why they hadn't made more changes, they essentially replied, "I knew something larger was wrong, but I didn't think it would help to move words around." Our students have been trained to review and to redo their texts, to look at their writing part by part, word by word, and in so doing miss the sense of the *WHOLE* text — the meaning of the text. Most students lack strategies for reading and revising the whole text and for reordering lines of reasoning or for asking questions about their purposes or readers.

Our students redo their texts, guided by their preconceptions and preoccupations about how texts look and how texts get written. Most students think in terms of rules, and in terms of correctness, thinking of the kind of prescriptive advice textbooks give — what I like to call the "Gradgrind Choakumchild School of Composing" that orders students to be precise, to be specific, be correct, be concrete, to avoid passives, avoid prepositions at the end of sentences or conjunctions at the beginning of sentences, but above all, to be creative. These abstract rules about written products which students assume guide revision are applied even when some of them are not appropriate for the specific text the student is creating.

Part of our students' confusion results from our confused notion of the process leading to the production of written texts. This is not to claim that teachers underestimate the importance of rewriting, but rather to claim that the textual models many teachers use do not support that emphasis. I am referring to the writing model which places major emphasis on invention and instructs students that the most important work for them as writers takes place in this imaginary territory called "prewriting"; and that this work involves finding a subject and finding a voice by which they as writers can speak with authority of their unique experiences.

But this model which posits the self as the source of writing too often leads teachers to underemphasize the

textual nature of writing. By emphasizing the discovery of a subject within the self prior to the actual putting of words on paper, this model can easily lead to the assumption that an ideal, invisible text exists the moment it is conceived by the writer.

Thus, writing becomes a second-hand activity in which the student waits for inspiration and then tries to recover a text by finding the right words to correspond to a text existing prior to the written word. No wonder that students trained by this model so often resist putting their first words on the page. They are doomed to failure from the start; they can never accurately repeat in written words a subject they are led to believe is hidden deep inside of them. Written language, in fact, can easily be seen as the enemy — something getting in the way of what the student is really trying to say. Given this textual model, silence is a logical alternative.

How different if a student is taught a model of writing which sees the first words placed on a page not as an impossible effort to recover a lost text, but as the beginning of a process leading to the construction of a text in the future. Such a model of writing would be consistent with what we have learned from research about the writing and rewriting strategies of experienced writers. In my work with experienced writers, I have found that they seek to discover meaning in the rereading and rewriting of their texts by exploiting the lack of clarity, the dissonances, they sense as they read what they have written. Rereading and rewriting bring the text and the imagination together.

In contrast to our students' definitions and assumptions about revision, experienced writers define their revision process this way:

*Rewriting:* "It is a matter of looking at the kernel of what I have written, the content, and then thinking about it, responding to it, making decisions, and actually restructuring it."

*Rewriting:* "I rewrite as I write. It is hard to tell what is a first draft because it is not determined by time. In one draft, I might cross out three pages, write two, cross out a fourth, rewrite it, and call it a draft. I am constantly writing and rewriting. I can only conceptualize so much in my first draft — only so much information can be held in my head at one time; my rewriting efforts are a reflection of how

much information I can encompass at one time. There are levels and agenda which I have to attend to in each draft."

*Rewriting:* "Rewriting means on one level, finding the argument, and on another level, language changes to make the argument more effective. Most of the time I feel as if I can go on rewriting forever. There is always one part of a piece that I could keep working on. It is always difficult to know at what point to abandon a piece of writing. I like this idea that a piece of writing is never finished, just abandoned."

*Revising:* "It means taking apart what I have written and putting it back together again. I ask major theoretical questions of my ideas, respond to those questions, and think of proportion and structure, and try to find a controlling metaphor. I find out which ideas can be developed and which should be dropped. I am constantly chiseling and changing as I revise."

The experienced writers do not speak of finishing their work, but rather of abandoning it because they have discovered in the experience of writing that writing is revision — it is the entering of a process, not the observation of a product, an exploration that is willing to abide contradiction, in which mutually exclusive terms and concepts — active/passive, writer/reader are embraced.

The experienced writers describe their primary objective when revising as finding a form or shape for their argument. Although the metaphors vary, these writers often use structural expressions such as "finding a framework, a pattern, or a design for their sequence of ideas." When questioned about this emphasis, they respond that since their first drafts are usually scattered attempts to define their territory, their objective in a second draft is to begin observing general patterns of development and deciding what should be included and what excluded. One writer explained: "I have learned from experience that I need to keep writing a first draft until I figure out what I want to say. Then in a second draft, I begin to see the structure of an argument and how all the various subarguments which are buried beneath the surface of all those sentences are related."

The search for a clear form for an argument is both a heuristic and a communicative device. By making a body of

ideas readily intelligible to a reader, these writers are exerting control over their previously amorphous thoughts and in this way evince a capacity to make language work for them in embodying and refining their ideas.

The experienced writers whom I have worked with express a second objective after a concern for form — that is a concern for their readership. They have conceptualized a reader (reading their product) whose existence and whose expectations strongly influence their revising. They have abstracted the standards of a reader, and this reader seems to be partially a refraction of themselves — a reader who functions as a necessary partner in the creation of the meaning of the text — a critical and productive collaborator, but a collaborator who has yet to love the text. The idea of a reader's judgment causes dissonance and requires experienced writers to make revisions on all levels; such a reader gives them just what our students lack — new eyes to “review” their work.

But these revision strategies for finding a form and for meeting the expectations of a reader are more than communication — they are part of the process of discovering — of creating — meaning.

Meanings, as Ann Berthoff has shown us, are relationships, connections, emerging and unfolding in surprising ways as texts are written and rewritten. At the beginning of the writing process, there is no precise meaning — there is the blank page and the terror that all writers feel at facing that blank page, but at the end of the process there is a piece of writing which has detached itself from the writer and found its own meaning.

This process of discovering meaning is a constant struggle against *INTENT*, a struggle against the surface level connections we begin with, against the clichés and conventions of thought — a struggle to read our text and to learn from our writing what we want to say.

For this is the heart of revision, this struggle against *INTENT* — the process by which writers recognize and resolve dissonance — sensing the lack of congruence between what their text does and what they think it should do, between intention and execution, between the conception and the product. Either the writer senses dissonance because of the inconsistencies and contradictions between original plans and the actual text — or even more interestingly, the text does what the writer intended, but the process of writing has transformed the writer's intention.



Dissonance can be recognized on any level as writers reread their texts: it can be, for instance, the repetition of the same word, an awkward sentence, an idea that doesn't connect, or an example that won't be understood. As writers we know that problems are infinite — the universe cannot be controlled — but our choices of what to do are finite. We can decide to make a change; we can decide not to make a change; or we can decide to wait to make a change either because we don't know exactly how to make the change or because we realize that waiting is the best course of action, since another change later on might negate the need to change the immediate problem. For instance, we might not need to find a synonym for a word or not need to rewrite an awkward sentence if we see on further rereading that the problem is not really with the word or with the sentence, but rather one of a confused thought. Or we might not need to rewrite a dull introductory paragraph right away if the entire focus or structure of the text will be changed.

This decision to wait to make a change, to tolerate dissonance as one continues to reread and rewrite a text, is one of the chief differences between the revising strategies of inexperienced student writers and experienced writers. Experienced writers have learned to tolerate dissonance, chaos, and some uncertainty as they reread what they have written — in fact, to use the chaos as a way to generate meaning.

Our students, though, have been trained to seek closure right away. As they re-view what they have written, they sense something is wrong, make the change, and then proceed to the next problem in a straight forward march. In doing so, they patch up their errors and make local changes, but miss the sense of the whole text. They miss the discrepancies of logic, the need for more information, or confused structure — the larger concerns that govern writing and meaning. By attempting to resolve dissonance right away, they limit themselves to substituting and deleting words and phrases and to saying what they intended to say, but — possibly — in better words. The text does not come together unless a writer learns to tolerate dissonance until the meaning evolves.

What then can we do to teach students to see revision as a process of discovery? First of all, I think that we need to see the students' texts as the primary texts for the writing

class. For too long we have used the idealized standards of professional writers as the model for students to imitate, encouraging what James Joyce called the “Burgher Notion of Writing,” the poet Byron in un-dress pouring out verses, just as a city fountain pours out water. By offering polished, professional texts to students, we are not showing them the process by which the text was written; we are not letting them in on the chaos and uncertainty that makes writing interesting and productive.

By studying with our students their various drafts, we will be showing them that first drafts are characteristically filled with the most obvious connections between ideas; filled with confused directions, detours, and missed connections; and that by reading and rereading their first drafts, by resisting order too early, they will find a different meaning evolving as the text is written and rewritten. We will be helping students to develop a critical method of reading by providing an example of a text coming into being — their own text or that of their fellow students — and in so doing, encouraging habits of questioning and interpreting, showing students how to ask of their writing: “How does it change my meaning when I make this change?” or “What is the effect on the meaning of my writing if I change my point of view, language, or structure?”

But, most importantly, in order to teach our students this habit of questioning that is so important for revision, we need to provide them with such a model in our responses to their writing. Although conferences are a successful technique for responding to student writing, it is just physically and mentally impossible to give every student conference time for every draft. Instead, I think it is important to develop written comments for students, because such comments not only provide a permanent record for students, but also dramatize the presence of a reader, raising questions from a reader’s point of view, engaging them with the issues they are writing about, and noting places in the text where the reader is puzzled about the meaning.

We know that our comments are important because they create the motive for revising. Without comments from their teachers or from their peers, student writers assume that their writing has communicated their meaning and perceive no need for revising the substance of their writing.

Yet as much as we believe in the importance of thoughtful commentary, we are not always sure how to proceed, not

always sure if all the time we spend in commenting has a positive effect on our student writing. Last year I began to research this problem because it seemed to me that since we now have some sense of what students do when they revise, we must begin to understand what messages we are giving students through our comments and whether, in our comments, we are reinforcing the wrong assumptions about revising.

Let me briefly summarize some of the conclusions I reached.

My first conclusion is that *teachers' comments can take students' attention away from their own purposes in writing a particular text and focus that attention on the teachers' purpose in commenting.* The teacher appropriates the text from the student by confusing the student's purpose in writing the text with her own purpose in commenting. Students make the changes the teacher wants rather than those the student perceives necessary, since the teacher's concerns imposed on the text create the reasons for the subsequent changes. We have all heard our perplexed students say to us when confused by our comments: "I don't understand how *YOU* want me to change this." Or "Tell me what *YOU* want me to do." In the beginning of the process there was the writer, her words, and her desire to communicate her ideas. But after the comments of the teacher are imposed on the first or second draft, the student's attention dramatically shifts from, "This is what I want to say" to "This is what *YOU* the teacher are asking me to do."

This appropriation of the text by the teacher happens particularly when teachers identify errors in usage, diction, and style in a first draft and ask students to correct these errors when they revise; such comments give the student an impression of the importance of these errors that is all out of proportion to how they should view these errors at this point in the process.

It would not be so bad if students were only commanded to correct errors, but more often than not, students are given contradictory messages; they are commanded to edit a sentence to avoid an error or to condense a sentence to achieve greater brevity of style and then told in the margins that the particular paragraph needs to be more specific or to be developed more.

An example of this problem can be seen in the following paragraph:

DO MORE RESEARCH  
 WORRY-BE PRECISE - WHICH SUNDAY?  
 Comma NEEDED  
 THESE SENTENCES ARE TOO CHOPPY  
 Every year [on one Sunday in the middle of January] tens of millions of people cancel all events, plans or work to watch the Super Bowl. This audience includes [little boys and girls, old people, housewives and men.]  
 WORD CHOICE, WHY CANCEL?  
 BE SPECIFIC - WORDS - YOU HAVE COVERED EVERYONE  
 AND WHY WHAT SPOTS? AWKWARD  
 Many reasons have been given to explain why the Super Bowl has become so popular ~~that~~ commercial spots cost up to \$100,000.00. One explanation is that people like to take sides and root for a team. Another is that some people like the pageantry and excitement of the event. ~~These reasons~~ alone, however, do not explain a happening as big as the Super Bowl.  
 ANOTHER WHAT?  
 HOWEVER,  
 TOO COLLOQUIAL  
 THIS ¶ NEEDS TO BE EXPANDED IN ORDER TO BE MORE INTERESTING TO A READER.

In commenting on this draft, the teacher has shown the student how to edit the sentences, but then commands the student to expand the paragraph in order to make it more interesting to a reader. The interlinear comments and the marginal comments represent two separate tasks for this student; the interlinear comments encourage the student to see the text as a fixed piece, frozen in time, that just needs some editing. The marginal comments, however, suggest that the meaning of the text is not fixed, but rather that the student still needs to develop the meaning by doing some more research. Students are commanded to edit and develop at the same time. These different signals given to students, to edit and to develop, to condense and to elaborate, represent the failure of teachers' comments to direct genuine revision of the text as a whole.

Moreover, the comments are worded in such a way that it is difficult for students to know what is the most important problem in the text and what problems are of lesser importance. No scale of concerns is offered to a student, with the result that a comment about spelling or a comment about an awkward sentence is given weight equal to a comment about organization or logic. The comment that seemed to represent this problem best was one teacher's command to his student: "Check your commas and semi-colons and think more about what you are thinking about." This language makes it difficult for a student to sort out and decide what is most important — the commas or his thinking about what he is thinking about — and what is least important.

What we see from these comments is that the processes

of revising, editing, and proofreading are collapsed and reduced to a single trivial activity, and the students' misunderstanding of revision as a rewording activity is reinforced by their teachers' comments. Too often revision becomes a balancing act for students in which they make the changes that are requested, but do not take the risk of changing anything that was not commented on even if the students sense that other changes are needed. A more effective text does not evolve from such changes alone, yet the student does not want to take the chance of reducing a finished, albeit inadequate paragraph, to chaos, to fragments in order to rebuild it, if such changes have not been requested by the teacher.

My second conclusion from my study of teachers' comments is that most *Teachers' comments are not text-specific and could be interchanged, rubber stamped from text to text.* The comments are not anchored in the particular's of the students' text, but rather are a series of vague directives that are not text-specific. The comments on the paragraph below illustrate this problem: One could easily remove all the comments from this paragraph and rubber-stamp them on another student text, and they would make as much or as little sense on the second text as they do here.

✓ BEGIN BY TELLING YOUR READER WHAT YOU ARE WRITING ABOUT.

Now in the sixties it was drugs, in the seventies it was rock and roll. Now in the eighties, one of the most controversial subjects is nuclear power. The United States is in great need of its own source of power.

← ABRUPT TRANSITION

Because of environmentalists, coal is not an acceptable source of energy.

(They say it creates too much pollution). [Solar and wind power have not yet received the technology necessary to use them] It seems that nuclear

power is the only feasible means right now for obtaining self-sufficient

power. However, too large a percentage of the population are against nuclear power claiming it is unsafe. With as many problems as the United

States is having concerning energy, it seems a shame that the public is so quick to "can" a very feasible means of power. Nuclear energy should not be given up on, but rather, more nuclear plants should be built.

SENTENCE

THESIS NEEDED

TONE SHIFT

I have observed an overwhelming similarity in the generalities and abstract commands given to students. There seems to be among teachers an accepted but unwritten canon for commenting on student texts. This uniform code of commands, requests, and pleadings demonstrates that the teacher holds license for vagueness while the student is commanded to be specific. The students I interviewed admitted to having great difficulty with these vague directives. The students stated that when a teacher writes in the margins or as an end comment, “choose precise language” or “think more about your audience” revising becomes a guessing game. In effect, the teacher is saying to the student, “Somewhere in this paper is imprecise language or lack of awareness of an audience and you must find it.” The problem presented by these vague commands is compounded for the students when they are not offered any strategies for carrying out these commands.

Students are told they have done something wrong and that there is something in their text that needs to be fixed before the text is acceptable. But to tell students that they have done something wrong is not to tell them what to do about it. In order to offer a useful revision strategy to a student, the teacher must anchor that strategy in the specifics of the student’s text. For instance, to tell our student, the author of the second paragraph, “to be specific” or “to elaborate” does not show our student what questions the reader has about the meaning of the text, or what breaks in logic exist that could be resolved if the writer supplied specific information, nor is the student shown how to achieve the desired specificity.

Instead of offering strategies, the teachers offer what is interpreted by students as rules for composing; the comments suggest to students that writing is just a matter of following the rules. Indeed, the teachers seem to impose a series of abstract rules about written products even when some of them are not appropriate for the specific text the student is creating. The student author of this paragraph is commanded to follow the conventional rules for writing a five paragraph essay — to begin the introductory paragraph by telling his reader what he is going to say and to end the paragraph with a thesis sentence. Somehow these abstract rules about what five paragraph products should look like do not seem applicable to the problems this student must confront when revising, nor are the rules specific strategies he

could use when revising. There are many inchoate ideas ready to be exploited in this paragraph, but the rules do not help the student to take stock of his ideas and use the opportunity he has, during revision, to develop those ideas.

The problem here is a confusion of process and product; what one has to say about the process is different from what one has to say about the product.

Teachers who use this method of commenting are formulating their comments as if these drafts were finished drafts and were not going to be revised. Their commenting vocabularies have not been adapted to revision and they comment on first drafts as if they were justifying a grade or as if the first draft were the final draft.

My summary, therefore, from this research on commenting styles of teachers is that the news from the classroom is not good. For the most part, the teachers whose comments I studied did not respond to student writing with the kind of thoughtful commentary which will help students to engage with the issues they are writing about or which will help them question their purposes and goals in writing a specific text.

One reason for this is that as teachers we often read our students' writing with biases about what the student should have said or about what he or she should have written, and our biases determine how we will comprehend and respond to the writing. Often, we find what we look for; we expect to find errors so instead of reading and responding to the meaning of the text, we correct our students' writing. We need to reverse this approach. Instead of finding errors or showing students how to patch up parts of their texts, we need to sabotage our students' conviction that the drafts they have written are complete and coherent. We need to offer comments that will force students back into the chaos, back to the point where they are shaping and restructuring their meaning.

For if the content of a student text is lacking in substance and meaning, if the order of the parts must be rearranged significantly in the next draft, if paragraphs must be restructured for logic and clarity, then many sentences are likely to be changed or deleted anyway. There seems to be no point in having students correct usage errors or condense sentences that are likely to disappear before the next draft is completed. In fact, to identify such problems in a text at this early first draft stage, when such problems are likely

to abound, can give a student a disproportionate sense of their importance at this stage in the writing process. In responding to our students' writing, we should be guided by the recognition that it is not spelling or usage problems that we as writers first worry about when drafting and revising our texts.

We need to develop an appropriate level of response for commenting on a first draft and to differentiate that from the level suitable to a second or third draft. Our comments need to be suited to the draft we are reading. In a first or second draft, we need to respond as any reader would, registering questions, reflecting befuddlement, and noting places where we are puzzled about the meaning of the text.

Written comments need to be viewed not as an end in themselves, a way for teachers to satisfy themselves that they have done their jobs, but rather as a means for helping students to become more effective writers. As a means they have limitations; they are, in fact, disembodied remarks — one absent writer responding to another absent writer. The key to successful commenting is to have what is said in the comments and what is done in the classroom mutually reinforce and enrich each other. Commenting on papers assists the writing course in achieving its purpose. Written comments need to be an extension of the teacher's voice — an extension of the teacher as reader. Exercises in such activities as revising a whole text or individual paragraphs together in class, noting how the sense of the whole dictates the smaller changes, looking at options, evaluating actual choices, and then discussing the effect of these changes on revised drafts — these exercises and other similar ones need to be used to take students through the cycles of revising and to help them overcome their anxiety about revising. We need to acquaint our students with that anxiety we all feel at reducing what looks like a finished draft into fragments and chaos.

The challenge we face as teachers is to develop comments which will provide an inherent reason for students to revise; it is a sense of revision as discovery, as a repeated process of beginning over, as starting out new, that our students have not learned. We need to show our students, through our comments, why new choices would positively change their texts, and thus show them the potential for development implicit in their own writing. We need to show them the provocation and the promise their own writing offers — in the possibility of revision.