

exercises. It should perhaps be noted that the object of the exercises involving the model is by no means restricted to the description of the model. Indeed, one thing that becomes apparent very quickly is that writing is a strikingly limited tool for the mere description of the external world, and that its real forte is the externalization of inner states.

One might have thought, perhaps, that the nudity of the model might prove sexually provocative and therefore embarrassing (or worse). In practice however, this does not appear to be the case, except perhaps initially for a few moments. It turns out that the body has far more interest than mere sexiness, and it is more likely to be the very unfamiliarity of the body that is disconcerting rather than its sexiness.

I am aware that designing a course in this manner is a provocative act. But it seems to raise a healthy challenge to prevailing pedagogical designs. Oddly enough, the students cotton on to the idea easily, and seem enthusiastic about the possibilities it offers of active studio work in writing.

The success of a class, I believe, depends more than is usually thought on its pedagogical design, which is what I have stressed here. But of course it also depends upon the acumen and sensitivity of the person conducting it. However, it has been my observation that the teacher tends to see the relation between his work and the student's achievement as a relation of cause and effect. It would be more accurate to see the relation as analogous to that which obtains between setting and action in a play. One of the virtues of the pedagogical design I have described is that it could serve as a model for a teacherless class, or at least that it could help clarify the relatively modest degree to which learning is directly dependent on teaching.

I have deliberately refrained from giving any details as to the actual exercises which constitute the class in the hope that you may find yourself sufficiently intrigued to come and have a look. The students would get a kick out of it and so might you . . .

"A writer keeps surprising himself . . .
he doesn't know what he is saying
until he sees it on the page."

Thomas Williams

Mixing Levels of Revision

David Lowenthal

Orderly and straightforward revision, in which editorial tasks are delimited draft by draft, breaks down with lengthy and complex tasks. In rewriting a book, I have had to combine various stages of revision in each draft — adding new material, reshaping thoughts, striving for coherent expression, and polishing prose simultaneously instead of serially. This kaleidoscopic way of working yields unexpected advantages that compensate for its untidy clutter: it helps to maintain the pace of revision, resolves problems left over from previous drafts, and stimulates new ideas and reconsiderations which, at a late stage in the editorial process, come as necessary nuisances.

For some years I have followed a regular system of rewriting. This tried and true routine has recently failed me in rewriting a book. Rather than working in an orderly sequence I have had to backtrack to previous tasks, undertaking late much of what should be done early in the process of revision. Confusion and anxiety result.

Why has this happened? The explanation suggests a remedy. My present task is too complex and prolonged for the normal routine, one draft after another, each with a set goal. Instead, I now have to consider problems of content, structure, meaning, and style in the same draft, amalgamating various stages of rewriting.

Let me be specific. My book concerns the ways we use the past and how we transform it in doing so. My sources are enormously varied: they range from discussions of the meaning of history and dissertations on memory to debates about architectural preservation and appreciation of old movies, antiques, family trees, and science-fiction time travel. Some of these materials are quite easy to deal with; straightforward and lucid, they need little reorganization to fit my framework, emerging only slightly altered from their original form. Other sources, by contrast, pose extraordinary difficulties; to unravel and render accessible convoluted arguments couched in opaque, jargon-laden prose may require several revisions.

These disparities endure through several drafts, with some sections long seeming more finished than others. Certain segments will be intelligible, even elegant, other portions awkward or unclear. This unevenness was initially distressing, for it not only upset my writing habits but cast doubt on my presumptions about revising. Let me first detail these habits and presumptions.

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Author's address: Department of Geography, University College London, London NW1 2HE
0022-2224/80/1000-0383\$02.00/0© 1980 Visible Language, Box 1972 CMA, Cleveland,
OH 44106.

I habitually type out the first draft of a paper completely, if possible without a break, never turning back to review or alter what I have written. After several days, sometimes longer, I re-read and revise the draft. I then re-type the altered version and again wait several days before embarking on the next revision.

Each draft entails its own specific tasks and aims. The purpose of the first draft is to externalize my thoughts, setting on paper the gist of what concerns me, without reference to notes. The actual process of writing also shows how my materials and ideas fit together and suggests conclusions. Thus the first draft goes beyond what I previously knew, leading me to new discoveries.

In the second draft, adding subsidiary materials from collected notes and source materials, I seek to make the paper logical and complete. Some of the new data may conflict with arguments and conclusions expounded in the first draft. The second draft assesses all the pertinent evidence, old and new, and establishes the essay's essential structure. (Sometimes two drafts are needed to accomplish these aims.)

My third draft shapes the essay into coherent form. Smoothing and eliding the heterogeneous second draft, I eliminate duplications and irrelevancies, rephrase or explain what seems obscure or ambiguous, shuffle bits of the essay around to accord with its structure. I usually re-read the revised third draft carefully before and after retyping, so that I can then send it to colleagues for their reactions.

My fourth draft considers these reactions, which are diverse in type. Some concern the organization of the whole essay, others suggest materials I ought to include or arguments that controvert my conclusions, still others point to errors of fact or criticize murky or awkward constructions. This, unlike earlier drafts, deals with matters at all stages of writing and revision; additions and corrections are made at the expense of coherence.

My fifth draft shapes the patchy and heterogeneous fourth into a readable and persuasive essay. The task is mainly stylistic: I smooth linkages between sections, correct the structure of paragraphs and sentences, cut out extraneous modifiers, choose the right words.

Checking back with the original sources and compiling references discloses errors that necessitate a sixth draft. Re-checking is salutary and essential. One of my history professors at the University of Wisconsin required his graduate students to verify the sources of some staff member's article in a reputable journal. At least half the references were defective in every case, misquoting sources or mistaking pagination, title, journal date, volume. Awareness of fallibility is no cure: not only do I invariably make errors in transcribing, but I often misinterpret sources or overlook relevant points within them. Correcting such errors involves pruning duplications, adding interstitial phrases, revising arguments.

This revision sequence works well enough for brief essays, especially those that depend on relatively homogeneous source materials. But it fails to function for long monographs, especially when some sources require much more re-interpretation than others. The need to keep in mind connections and overlaps with other chapters makes it far more difficult

to revise a chapter in a book than an isolated essay of comparable length.

The continual addition of fresh material also militates against the orderly revision of any lengthy piece of work. In writing an essay I usually rest content, by the second draft, with sources already examined; other potentially useful materials can be saved for another essay. But in writing a book, I am concerned to overlook nothing. And during the long interval between the start of writing and the final draft, new sources are bound to come to light, old ideas to generate fresh lines of inquiry. I may have to integrate additional material into a late revision of the text, not merely to exemplify existing points but to re-shape or enlarge on the book as a whole.

In place of an orderly sequence of tasks taken up draft by draft, each revision now includes work which, according to my original model, ought to have been completed in previous drafts. Thus at the fifth draft, in which my main purpose is to produce a readable essay, I may have to cope also with new data, with obscurities that need clarification, and with problems of location, repetition, and consistency.

This situation at first seemed to me profoundly unsatisfactory. It implied inadequate preparation for writing, deranged my sequence of progressive revision, and raised fundamental issues at the eleventh hour. And it was terribly untidy. Here I had a fairly neat typescript of draft X; but some of its pages bore notations about sections that were out of place and lucinae to be added from other chapters and from sources at various stages of digestion: rough notes, quotes on index cards, Xeroxed sheets from journals, newspaper cuttings, marked pages of books. If only all this clutter would disappear and let me carry on with my tidy typescript to the next draft!

But the clutter will not go away; it cries out for inclusion. The additions attest to the continuously creative nature of writing, no stage of which can be encapsulated from the rest. This motley, disordered, heterogeneous mess must be dealt with, however late in the day. And as I do all these difficult things, I begin to find virtues in such kaleidoscopic revision — virtues lacking in a straightforward sequential operation. I learn to anticipate these benefits as aids in rewriting.

Maintaining pace is one advantage. At some point in any draft things come unstuck: I cannot spell out a particular idea, clarify a certain thought, find the right example, decide where something best fits. A rigorously ordered schedule would require me to resolve each of these problems before moving on. But this would delay revision and make it counterproductive. Keeping tempo in rewriting is almost as important as in the initial draft. Failure to resolve a problem in the "appropriate" revision matters less when I expect to confront it later, along with other problems similarly out of sequence. Hopeful of an ultimate solution, I no longer feel that the difficulty need be faced here and now.

A second advantage is that answers come more easily. Far from shirking problems, postponement can actually help to solve them. A problem left over from a previous revision looks quite different at the next, not simply because it patently obstructs the text flow, but also because the next editing task exhibits the recalcitrant material in a new light. Now that the text as a

whole is better organized and reads more smoothly, outstanding problems are easier to scrutinize and often fall into place with little difficulty. Many troublesome passages are now seen to be superfluous, at best worth an aside or a footnote; indeed, this may be why they were problematic to begin with.

Each successive revision demands re-reading the text in a different way — a change of pace that can yield valuable perspectives on outstanding problems. In revising for meaning and structure, for example, I may come to grief over a source so murky that I despair of elucidating it. But I can handle it on the next revision, which moves to an examination of the text phrase by phrase and word by word. Attentive to syntax more than to structure, I see how to fit in parts that previously eluded construal, and jettison the residue.

Innovation is a third benefit of editorial irregularity. Coping with new materials or with leftovers from previous revisions stimulates basic reconsiderations. Confronting unresolved problems in the midst of an otherwise straightforward task can inspire innovation. New-found evidence on a topic I have already written up and revised not only corrects or enlivens my text, but may lead me to review the whole topic, raising issues to explore further in subsequent or previous chapters. Undigested material from earlier revisions jogs the imagination like any editorial change of pace — stopping to read a book, to retype a passage, to discuss points with a colleague. Revising on several levels at once is reinvigorating. Key words and phrases, like interesting ideas, that fail to surface during close attention to the matter in hand, may emerge instead from apparently unrelated, serendipitous discoveries.

Certain risks attend this fruitful juggling of tasks. If carried too far, it endangers any sense of progress in revising; the writer needs to feel he is moving from one level to another towards completion. Complexity is another danger: to manipulate material on several levels at once requires lots of uninterrupted time, for it is difficult to come back to such a task after a break. To differentiate types of material within and among chapters requires space as well as time — space enough to shuffle heterogeneous sources at various levels of revision without losing the way.

Afterword

I have just re-read the above after a lapse of half a year and the receipt of comments from two friends. One writes: "Surely you have too many separate drafts. My solution is to retype the material when it is so heavily amended that it is difficult to read. . . . I certainly don't anticipate re-writing five times!"

And the other: "First draft. Twenty pages of incoherent fragments. . . . Instructions by me to me: Cut This Out. This Won't Do, Think about this, This Is Awful. . . . Second draft. Write the book. . . (A year or so has passed, you understand). . . . Slash ruthlessly. . . . Slash yet again."

I have not altered what I wrote, except for a few points that seemed unclear. But the passage of time and these reactions make me realize how idiosyncratic it is; the way I revise only faintly reflects how anyone else might go about it.

But my uneasiness extends beyond this. My essay does not even describe the way I actually revise; it tells how I now think I should revise, as opposed to how I used to think. I have ignored the self-generated interference involved in writing and re-writing — interference that stifles creativity, deranges common sense, and impedes the flow of work.

Moreover, my tone gives a false impression of self-confidence, as though I mostly knew what I was doing and found it good. That is far from being the case. The start of each revision, even of each day's revision, can be more painful than the first draft. Several revisions induce a sense of ennui, no matter how long I have allowed the work to rest. I feel that I have seen it all before, that I wrote it better last time, that I have failed to make essential points, that it is all banal and boring, at once too simple and too complicated. Only a ruthless and drastic re-write will cure these ills, but for that I lack both time and energy. Nor have I any confidence that the new essay would really be any better.

So in despair — and with relief — I have the final draft re-typed. Perhaps it will look better when it is cleaner. In the end, the adventitious process of arranging all the tidily printed words on a safely proof-read page resolves many of the doubts. Even the wrong words, the badly phrased thoughts, now seem more or less all right — especially if I take care not to re-read them.