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Revising with Feedback

Revising with feedback is the most powerful way to revise, and happily enough it is also the most interesting and enjoyable technique. No-revising relies on a magical polishing process inside you—using luck and your unconscious. Quick revising relies on a detached critical consciousness: you step out of your involvement with your writing and clean it up with dispassionate pragmatic eyes; you can make quick harsh decisions because you haven't got time to vacillate, you must cut your losses. Thorough revising relies most of all upon time—more time for careful wrestling and more time in addition for setting your writing aside, which gives you newer, fresher eyes than you could get by mere will power or any vow to be dispassionate. Cut-and-paste revising (next chapter) relies on aesthetic intuition. When you revise with feedback you are of course trying to use all these faculties, but in addition you are using the most powerful tool of all: the eyes of others.

How Much Feedback and When

You can bring feedback into the revising process either early or late. If you bring it in early you are in effect using the reactions of others as part of the very process of making up your own mind. If you bring it in late, you are reaching all your conclusions alone but using the reactions of others to help you make those conclusions *work* better on readers.

You will want to hold off on feedback till the end if you are in a

hurry or if you know you don't want to make any changes in your thinking or if you are nervous about using feedback. In these situations you get feedback only once and you use it only for making minor or cosmetic changes. But bring feedback in early if you want the most powerful and interesting process and have time. It means getting feedback on two or more drafts and inviting others to be part of a slower and more organic process as you work out your thinking.

Here's how this longer process might look. You start by producing a draft. It's probably something you've long wanted to work on, something important to you, not something you have to force yourself to write for a deadline. You revise it enough to make it interesting and readable, but you aren't trying to make it your best work. You don't spend much time revising it and it probably doesn't represent your final thinking. (Cut-and-paste revising is especially useful here.) It probably has serious problems of structure and consistency. But it must be readable.

You get two friends to read it and then you sit down with them. You are more interested in their thoughts on the whole matter than their criticisms of your writing. Why try to fix weaknesses when you will probably take a whole new approach on your next draft? The conversation with them helps you see the whole thing in better perspective, gives you new ideas, and helps you make up your own mind what you think. Your draft was really just a letter to friends exploring your thinking.

On the basis of this first step of informal feedback you can "resee" the whole thing and write a brand new draft—not just strengthen that first draft.* On this draft, too, your main priority is not to try to get it right, perfect, make up your mind once and for all (unless you are in a hurry and know you have to stop with this draft). You are trying to let the whole thing develop slowly through your interaction with others. Wait patiently for things to jell. Again, you get readers to give you feedback on this draft: perhaps the same readers, perhaps new ones. And here, too, you are interested in all their thinking on the topic, not just their reactions to your writing. At this point things may click and it may be very clear to you how you want your final draft to go; but perhaps not.

*Occasionally, of course, you find that you stumbled onto the right idea and the right structure the first time and so now you are just improving that first draft rather than writing a completely new one.

You may take it through this process once or even twice again depending on your time and on how much you care.

Indeed, other people's feedback can lead you to a whole new understanding of the writing process so you develop a much longer time frame. That is, perhaps the feedback you get on this second round is very confusing: each reader has entirely different reactions, feelings, suggestions. You know your piece of writing isn't right yet, isn't done, but you are unclear about what changes to make. Perhaps you realize it could evolve in two very different directions but you don't know which you prefer. But you also know it's already good. Good enough, if you just polish it slightly, that others will want to read it; good enough perhaps even to publish. You are not done in the long run, but you know you have carried it as far as you want for now. You need to give it time to settle, give yourself time to have new thoughts and experiences and grow into a slightly different person. Then months or even years later you come back to it. You revise it and finally get it right.

I have let my story of a typical case of revising with feedback stretch into an extreme case. But the point I want to make is that when you revise with feedback, you develop a looser and more conditional sense of what it means to be *"done."* Instead of a clear one-step change from *rough draft* to *final draft*—from raw to cooked in one transaction—you are allowing a gradual evolution through time and through successive audiences. At each stage you can call your draft "done" or "not done" depending on how you want to use it. On the one hand you start using the word "done" early: you learn to polish slightly and re-type even your earliest drafts so that they are useful for others to read. But on the other hand, you learn to think of things as "undone" on into late drafts since you know that hearing the reactions of others can trigger continued growth even when you thought your mind was made up.

Enormous benefits flow from this odd flexibility about when to call something done. You aren't always struggling for perfection, worrying "Do I really know enough yet?" Instead of wrestling to get it right on the first try, you experiment without anxiety on different approaches and *wait* for the right way to pop into your mind. It will. There's a wonderful deep thud you feel when your meaning finally drops into place—just what you wanted to say—which is hard to achieve without trying out a draft or two on real readers and feeling how they understand your words.

Perhaps it seems as though this approach allows for too much indecision. I hear a tough person saying, "There's something wrong with all this tentativeness. Damn it, you can't write unless you learn to make up your mind." Which is true. Writing *is* a process of making up your mind, and much bad writing is bad because the writer didn't have the guts to do so—or because he made up his mind but still had inner doubts which fog up his writing and prevent him from asserting his conclusion crisply. The point is, though, that most people make up their minds better if they do so gradually without being under too much pressure.

This method of successive drafts not only helps you be more decisive in your final draft, it also helps you write more decisively on earlier drafts. You aren't committed to what you write on early drafts, so you don't have to hedge and be cautious. You find it easier to use bold strokes and definite language—to avoid the mumbling qualifications and maybe's that destroy strong writing. And sometimes you discover that an interesting hunch is true only because you permitted yourself to overstate it, go with it, and thereby discover arguments and evidence you never would have thought of if you had remained judicious.

Once you start enjoying the power of this slower interactive way of revising, you will learn to use it for other writing, not just pieces you want to write for yourself at a relaxed pace. You will learn to handle deadlines differently. If you have a month, you will be eager to use this new leverage of feedback and get yourself to produce an exploratory draft in a week so there are three more weeks for feedback and more drafts. Even if you only have a week, you will discover that you can dash off a draft tonight—since the pressure is off—and get at least one round of feedback and discussion before you have to figure out what you really think.

Your decision about when to bring in feedback, then, turns out in the end not to depend so much on *time* as on how much you want of that creative mess in which you let the thinking of others get all mixed up with your own. Here is a schematic summary of your options:

1. Minimal feedback. You should *always* use feedback to help you eliminate errors in grammar and usage from any final draft that needs to be polished—no matter what kind of revising you engage in. But don't let them talk about what you are saying or how you say it—just spelling, grammar, and usage.

2. Little feedback. You don't have much time or you don't like feedback or for some reason you want to keep others largely out of your writing process. You get one round of feedback only at the end, and you know you will stick with your conclusions no matter what they say. But you can still get enormous benefits from their reactions. Even if they happen to think you are dead wrong in one of your major ideas, their objection will help you make improvements in how you present that idea. For example:

- explain the idea entirely differently,
- insert a needed clarification or defense,
- remove a troublesome example or detail,
- put the idea in a different place in your whole structure.

And their reactions will help you make other small but important changes:

- remove bits that don't work,
- untangle some snarls in language or logic,
- change an annoying tone of voice here and there,
- insert some little introductions or transitions or clarifications that may make all the difference in the world to a reader's staying with you or not.

"Please find mistakes in spelling, grammar, and usage; and any awkward or unclear sentences. Don't tell me if you dislike or disagree with my thinking. I haven't got the time or strength for any major rewriting. But please point out places where you think I make an absolute fool of myself." This is a feedback request I sometimes make of my wife—usually at the last minute.

3. Medium feedback. Your mind is made up about your main message. You aren't willing to give yourself the grief of rethinking your position entirely; but you are willing to engage in *major* revisions of structure and strategy. Perhaps you argued your case through abstract reasoning, but feedback convinces you it's worth trying to do it almost entirely through example or anecdote. Perhaps feedback convinces you that you have to turn your whole structure upside down. Usually your revisions are less drastic. Once you understand what is confusing or bothering a reader, it is usually not too difficult to find a way to deal with the problem.

4. Lots of feedback. Everything is up for grabs from the beginning. You share drafts from the start—before you know your thinking. You let the interaction carry you on a voyage of discovery.

The crucial thing is to decide how much of the feedback process

you want. As I finish typing on this sheet of paper and take it out of the typewriter and put it face down on the pile to my right, I am reminded of how sometimes I don't want much. For I notice on the back (I usually write on the back of already-used paper); it says "Draft III, FSU, DR, p. 17." This is the third draft of a chapter David Riesman wrote about a competence-based program at Florida State University and circulated to readers for feedback. And yet I am on at least the third draft of this chapter now and haven't let anyone see what I've written. (I will get some feedback before I finish with it.) Sometimes, in short, I just want to work out my ideas myself. "I can do it my *own self*," says Abby, age three, as I start to help her with something difficult and she pushes my hands roughly away.

But Abby's phrase is ominous too. For sometimes after she has pushed me away, she must come back sheepishly and ask for help. And so have I numerous times had to put a draft through a major change later on after I thought it was settled but late feedback shows me I'm wrong. I fight the change harder when I've already invested so much work and made up my mind. It would have been easier if I had been willing to bring in feedback earlier. On other pieces of writing—where I feel more secure or unpossessive—I'm comfortable with bringing in feedback from the start.

You may be surprised by a powerful side effect of using feedback for revising—especially if you bring in feedback early. You may find that after years and years of strenuous but unsuccessful efforts to make your writing clear for *real* readers—teachers, employers, editors, strangers—all of a sudden you can write much more clearly now that you are just cleaning up a rough draft for a friend to read and respond to. You aren't even trying to make it your best writing yet your language turns out clearer, simpler, more direct. Once you realize that your reader is a friend and helper, sometimes you cut right through that abstractness or complicatedness or fog that has plagued you for so long. The important point psychologically is that when we write for "real audiences" like teachers and employers, the stakes are very high and we get too clenched. What's more we are liable, without realizing it, to feel the reader as *enemy*. After all, they *are* the enemy: they've hurt us deeply time and again in the past, the dirty bastards. When, on the other hand, we feel the reader as genuine friend and ally, suddenly

words flow more easily and humanly. This effortless change of audience can do more than all your strenuous wrestling in the past.

Your main task in getting feedback is to listen and see if you can experience what your reader is experiencing. If you succeed in doing so you will be able to see whether there's really something there to fix and if so how to fix it. Try being totally silent after you ask a few questions. Avoid the temptation to keep talking about what *you* had in mind; try discovering what you got into *their* minds. Try *believing* your readers: not so you are stuck with their view forever, but so you can see your writing through their eyes. You are not yet trying to make up your mind about anything, you are trying to enlarge your mind. You probably made up your mind as you wrote your draft so in a sense you are trying to unmake your mind. For more about how to get feedback see Section V.

The essential skill in all revising is the ability to look at your own writing and see potentialities: see what is almost there or sort of there or even to see what is not there at all but ought to be. It is like the ability to look at a room and see how it *could* look with different furniture differently arranged. More specifically you need:

- to see what the words don't yet say but want to say,
- to see a potential shape that's not yet there but which would make everything click,
- to see a simple way to say something that's now roundabout,
- to see bits you can leave out, even though you love them.

Time, intuition, and a detached critical consciousness are obviously helpful tools if you want to look at your writing and see what could be there. But nothing is so powerful as a chance to see your words through the eyes of others.