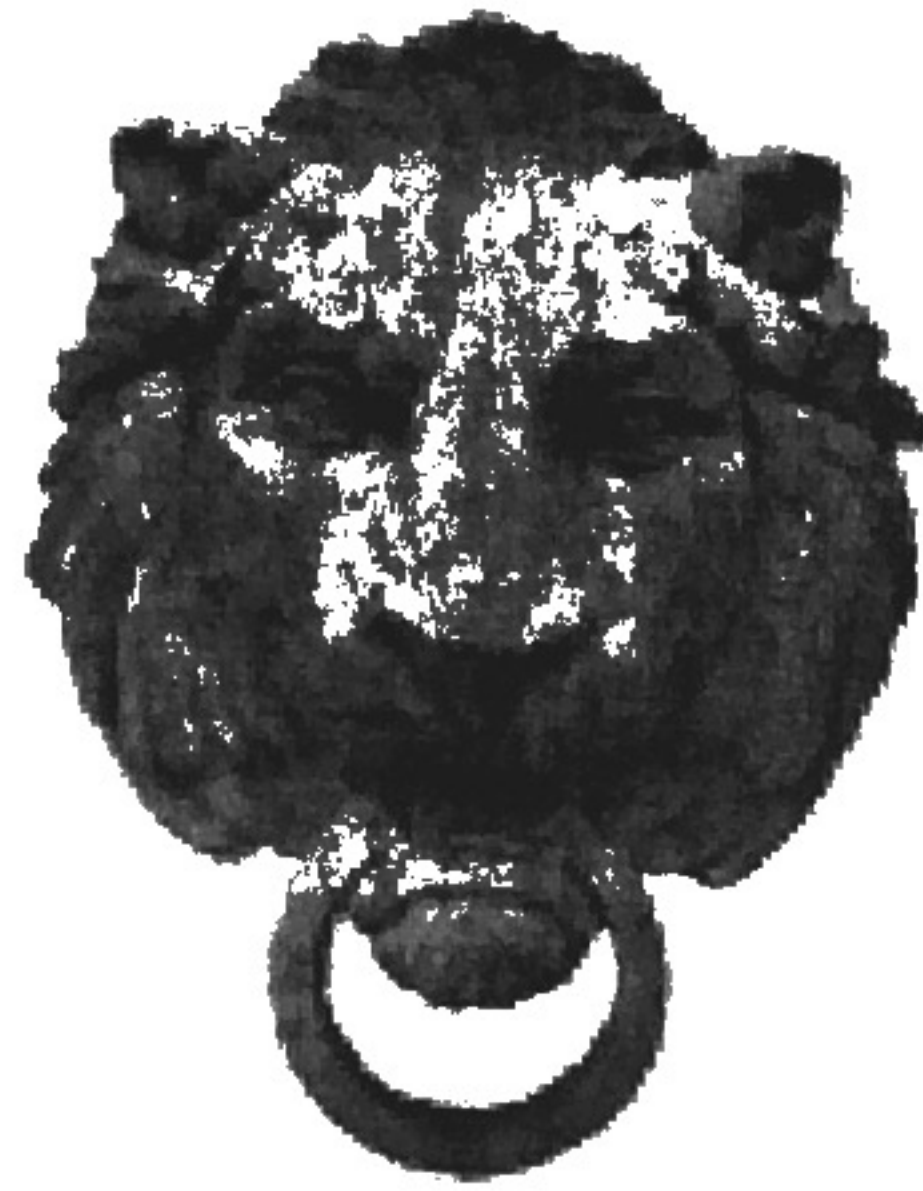




The MORNINGSIDE REVIEW

Selected essays from the
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
UNDERGRADUATE WRITING PROGRAM

Why I Revise

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“Why I ~~Write~~ Revise”

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There’s a stigma surrounding criticism and revision in student writing. Criticism, especially in graded classroom assignments, is often met with anxiety: who hasn’t been disappointed when a peer or teacher has recommended a serious revision? As writers, I think that we suffer from certain misconceptions about revision. Maybe we are audacious, and assume that our best efforts should be beyond criticism. Maybe we are afraid that a paper that must be revised is a bad paper. Maybe we just don’t like to hear what we’re doing wrong; but criticism is not simply the designation of an essay’s problems and revision is not simply the repair of those problems. I embrace revision, and I think that helps define my writing. For me, criticism is a conversation between writer and reader. Revision, then, is a chance to experiment and streamline, to align writing with intention, to give every sentence meaning and purpose.

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Yes, criticism and revision may involve correction of blatant errors—after all, it's hard to ask a peer or teacher to ignore mechanical problems. More often, though, I find that revision helps reconcile my voice with the reader's. I always want my writing to have its own natural intonation, to echo my voice; at the same time, I want my ideas and arguments to be clear. Unfortunately, my 'voice' often becomes convoluted, and what is perfectly clear to me, the writer, is unintelligible to the reader.

In *The New York Times* editorial "The Trouble With Intentions," Verlyn Klinkenborg notes that sentences are inherently "implacably honest": no matter how convoluted or ambiguous a sentence may read, it means exactly what it says. A sentence has no underlying motives or secret intentions, and so it doesn't matter what the author intended to communicate, only what was actually communicated. Indeed, in my own writing, there's often a disparity between what I write and what I mean to write. My understanding of my writing is informed by my intentions, which, Klinkenborg argues, are "always overruled by what your sentence literally says." In writing, it doesn't matter what I wanted to say, only what I actually said.

Criticism, then, is an opportunity to close the disparity between intention and result, to make sure, as best I can, that my sentences mean what I want them to mean. It's almost impossible for me to completely divorce my intention from my sentences' actual meaning and therein lies, for me, one of the great benefits of criticism: often, I don't need peer reviewers to "correct" my writing so much as I need them to tell me what I'm *actually* saying. I can never really read my writing objectively because I will always know what I mean to say; but I can hand my essay to a classmate or a friend and tell her,

"Don't let me explain myself or tell you what I'm trying to say."
If my peer reads the essay under those conditions, then I have
something of a gauge of what my essay actually says.

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This gauge is especially helpful when assessing complex,
lengthy sentences. I recently wrote an essay about Barbara
Ehrenreich's "Maid to Order," and how, in my view, she subtly
accuses her audience of perpetuating a classist system by
hiring maids to clean their houses. Here, in one draft, I try to
connect classism to racism:

"Ehrenreich has spent great space implicating her audience
in class-based oppression; in the same breath, she addresses
racial discrimination in the housekeeping industry." (3)

I assumed that I had expressed my idea clearly: Ehrenreich
implicates her audience in classism in the same way that she
implicates her audience in racism. My peer reviewers,
however, didn't quite understand what the sentence meant. I
noted that this sentence, which I had thought was perfectly
intelligible, wasn't clear at all to my classmates. I wondered:
*might my sentence be clear to me only because I know what I'm
trying to say?* In my final draft, I attempted to clarify the idea
that I had intended to communicate:

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"Having implicated her audience in class-based
discrimination, Ehrenreich turns her attention to
discrimination against minorities: is the overclass racist?"
(3)

I think that this sentence is less ambiguous than its
predecessor. Klinkenborg argues that ambiguity causes
writers to say what they don't mean, and he encourages
writers and readers to "be alert for ambiguities of every kind."
By eliminating uncertain language (i.e. "in the same breath,"
"addresses"), I also eliminate some ambiguity in the sentence.
By stating the question that Ehrenreich asks—"is the overclass
racist?"—I think I clarified *how* she addresses racial

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discrimination in the housekeeping industry (that is, by accusing the 'overclass' of racism). In this case, my classmates' criticism allowed me to distinguish between what I wanted to say and what I actually said.

The relationship between writer and reader is mutually fulfilling because only the reader knows what the writer is truly saying, but only the writer knows what he truly wants to say. With this in mind, I like to edit my own papers for moments that an outside critic wouldn't necessarily consider, moments that the reader might not object to but that nevertheless lend my essay a tone I don't want. I encountered a lot of these moments in a research paper I wrote about academically-driven high school students, in which I wanted to distance myself emotionally from the conflict. But my tone often veered towards the negative. In one sentence, I tried to note an attitude of entitlement among high-achieving students:

"There's a difference between a student who works hard and a student who believes that, because he works hard, everything he wants he should have." (4)

I like the cadence of this sentence. I think it's sharp, quick and punishing. But, as the rest of the essay came together, I realized that this sentence didn't quite fit. I didn't want to portray driven students as cutthroat or bratty, and I didn't know whether it was appropriate to have this damning, almost mean, moment in an analytical paper. Even though I felt uneasy about this sentence, my classmates had no objection to it when they reviewed the essay. I didn't include the sentence, though: my classmates may have approved of it on its own, but they didn't know the tone, the voice, I wanted to impress. Thus, when I try to establish my voice in an essay, I value my own critical eye—only I know what I want.

On a larger scale, I like to use revision in order to experiment; often, I rearrange my entire paper, which I did while writing the same research paper on driven high school students. I brought one paragraph, originally on the eleventh page, to the middle of the second; I brought another from the third page to the ninth. Other paragraphs I simply switched—the fourth paragraph traded places with the fifth, the seventh with the eighth, and so on and so forth. I rearrange my essays because I want them to have a logical structure; I want each sentence and paragraph to have a purpose, to further my argument until I come to the full extent of my claim. In this essay, I claimed that students' fixation on hyper-competitive universities led to an achievement-oriented high school experience. I worried, though, that I was establishing claims before I had logically come to them—I referred to a “loss of learning” on the second page, for example. Because I had already made these claims, my argumentative paragraphs lost a certain amount of purpose—it didn't seem that I was *really* arriving at my claims through my paragraphs. By rearranging the essay, I allowed myself to argue each point so that, when I discussed this “loss of learning,” my claim was earned.

I eliminate my writing as liberally as I rearrange it. Removing sentences and paragraphs from my papers helps me distinguish key components of my argument from unnecessary filler. In the same research paper, for example, I gave examples of real life students who experienced high levels of stress so that I might demonstrate the pressure to cheat. To supplement these examples, I created hypothetical students: a class president with excellent grades and low math scores, for example, or a budding scientist who struggles in English class. In a meeting, my teacher asked, “How are the hypothetical examples working?” I considered the question, and it struck me that, really, they served the same purpose as the actual examples. It struck me that the inclusion of

hypothetical examples might have been redundant, and so I removed all of them; my paper was immediately more succinct. More importantly, the actual examples now had more purpose because they weren't lost among the hypothetical ones.

For each essay that I write, I keep another blank document where I 'paste' sentences that I've 'cut' from the essay. I look over the document where I placed ultimately unused sentences and paragraphs from this same research essay and I'm struck (though unsurprised) by how unnecessary some of my writing is: "Not all students cheat." "Top schools prefer high grades." "Colleges admit a fraction of applicants." These sentences serve little purpose beyond reminding the reader of what he or she is already aware of. They don't bring anything new to my essay, and that is why I eliminate my writing with such little hesitation: I want each paragraph, each sentence, to have purpose. I want my writing to be succinct and full of meaning.

Consider this very essay. A few days ago, the order of paragraphs was almost reversed. A whole page concerned an argument between my roommate and me. My introduction was a metaphor about singing—*really*. I have open before me the document of sentences and paragraphs that I've removed from this essay; it is 1,441 words long and includes the not-so-insightful assessment that "revision is interesting." And that's all OK, because this essay is so different now. I revise so fervently because I want my writing to be unambiguous, because I want my words to match my intentions, because I want each sentence that I write to move my argument. I can't accomplish all that in a single draft or even, perhaps, in infinite drafts; but each peer review, each self-edit, each rearrangement, each elimination, brings me a little closer to an essay with purpose.

Works Cited

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