

Suggestions for Radical Revision

From The Learning Commons

Getting started:

Note what responses or comments your readers have given you on your draft, and consider what concerns you have about it yourself, then try a few of the approaches outlined in the list of prompts below. Each prompt is followed by a principle so that you will understand the goal of the prompt and the writerly beliefs or values that generated it.

Why only try a few?

Because you don't want to overwhelm yourself. Focusing on parts and pieces of your draft will help you to make some immediate and tangible changes in your work. It is much harder to attempt to revise a piece of writing when the task is unspecified, and when the timeframe is indefinite. Radical revision strategies are designed to focus your attention on particular kinds of work to do. While you can work on each prompt for as long as you like, you can get a lot done by writing for ten or fifteen minutes each on the prompts you've chosen.

Why are there so many approaches?

Because different writers are working on different things—not every writer is in the same place. As many experienced writers know, each new project brings new challenges and reminds us of older ones. For example, many people write “working” beginnings to their poems and essays as placeholders for radically revised ones, which they compose only after they have reached the end of their drafts. This common practice demonstrates how writers create spaces in their processes for discovery, and how they anticipate the need for radical revision. The radical revision prompts offer you additional strategies for making discoveries during your drafting process.

How will radical revision improve my writing?

Radical revision is focused on helping you to clarify your ideas, to make explicit connections between parts of your draft, and to identify alternative structures for your draft. Initially, new writing may make your draft messier in terms of your grammar or syntax, but you will be able to address those issues during a final stage of revision. Since radical revision requires you to make active decisions about your work, you will improve your current draft, but you will also gain valuable insight into issues you can then anticipate in future work.

Radically Revising Essays

Prompts for generating missing text

1. Go to a place in your draft where you need to say more. Write to explain. Exhaust yourself. Principle: In early drafts, writers make associative leaps between elements, but don't explain their terms fully. But why exhaust yourself? When you write a little bit too much, you force a little past what you know.
2. Go to a place in the draft where you seem to be getting at your idea. Write to explain what that idea might be. Principle: Since many writers get to their ideas only at the end of their draft, this allows the writer to know that she has work to do in other places in the draft. It makes an idea specific when it was previously only almost said or implied.
3. Write a summary of one of the texts you are working with. Find a place for it in your draft. Principle: Good writers need to provide context for their audience who may not have not have read what they've read.
4. Find a key image or key language in your draft. Write to explain what this image or language might mean. Principle: Images and even individual words often contain ideas and questions that reveal themselves with closer reading and writing.

Prompts for making connections:

1. Write an unexpected, but connected story that comes to mind as you read your draft. You may not know how it fits, but write about it anyway. Principle: Writers often need help with the show/don't tell problem. A surprising story can also offer a tension or highlight a dilemma that the writer may be ignoring or can't yet see.
2. Find a place in a published text that helps you think about your idea. Copy the passage out and explain how it connects. Find a place for it in your draft. Principle: In early drafts writers often don't know why they've chosen a particular passage, but at this point they can often begin to choose texts and passages that really speak to what they are discovering.
3. Use a passage from another text to resist or doubt something you are writing about. Write to explain the counterargument. Principle: Good writers often include counterarguments to demonstrate that they understand the complexity of the issue they are exploring.
4. Write a paragraph in which you incorporate two texts. Put these texts in conversation with one another. (How do they extend, confirm, complicate, contradict, correct, or debate one another?) Principle: Typical compare-and-contrast paragraphs or essays can be derailed because the motivation is insufficiently articulated. Putting texts in conversation around an idea or a question can help.

Prompts for clarifying an essay's focus or argument

1. Rewrite completely the beginning of your draft to articulate specifically the problem your essay is exploring, or to change its focus, tone, or contract. Principle: Early beginnings are often just a placeholder. Writers often need to create a new beginning to accommodate new thinking.
2. Rewrite completely the ending of your draft to account for how your thinking has changed from the beginning and middle of your essay. Principle: Similar to the previous one, but endings are often even more difficult for writers than introductions.
3. Find an arbitrary (six to eight) number of claims, concepts, or questions in your draft that are most important to what you have written. Write a six to eight line poem that demonstrates how these claims are related to one another. Principle: Sometimes shifting genres can allow writers to clarify thinking or ideas and then return to the original genre. It can also lead to a distillation of thinking. Sometimes the writer might even make another related piece of writing.
4. Print out your draft and cut it up into sections (a section can be as small as a sentence) that each contain some discrete piece of thinking. Ask a friend to reassemble the parts in a new order that makes sense, and to tape it to blank sheets of paper, leaving blank space between ideas that are not explicitly connected. If you like this new order, consider what you might need to write in the blank spaces to make transitions or to flesh out ideas. Throw away pieces that repeat one another in essence or in fact. Principle: Writers often need to radically rethink their parts and how they relate to the whole or the idea.