4.4

REVISION IS CENTRAL TO DEVELOPING WRITING
Doug Downs

To create the best possible writing, writers work iteratively, composing in a number of versions, with time between each for reflection, reader feedback, and/or collaborator development. The revision implicit in this process—that is, significant development of a text's ideas, structure, and/or design—is central to developing writing. (Revision here is distinct from line editing or copyediting to “polish” a text.) In the same way that writing is not perfectible, writing also is not in the category of things that are often right the first time (see 5.1, “Writing Is an Expression of Embodied Cognition”). This principle also implies two corollaries. First, unrevised writing (especially more extended pieces of writing) will rarely be as well suited to its purpose as it could be with revision. Second, writers who don’t revise are likely to see fewer positive results from their writing than those who build time for feedback and revision into their writing workflows. When we teach the centrality of revision to writing development, therefore, we must also teach writers to develop workflows that anticipate and rely on revision and to discover what methods of revision best suit their own writing processes.

Revision works because writing shares a characteristic of other language-based endeavors: using language not only represents one’s existing ideas, it tends to generate additional language and ideas (see 3.0, “Writing Enacts and Creates Identities and Ideologies”). Writing something usually gives the writer something new, more, or different to say. Therefore, while writing, writers usually find something to say that they didn’t have to say before writing. This phenomenon creates an effect analogous to driving with headlights. The headlights reach only a fraction of the way to the destination; a writer can only begin writing what they “see” at the beginning. Driving to the end of the headlights’ first reach—writing the first draft—lets the headlights now illuminate the next distance ahead. A writer at the end of their first draft now sees things they did not when they began, letting them “drive on” through another draft by writing what they would have said had they known at the beginning of the first draft what they now know at the end of it (see 4.1, “Text Is an Object Outside of One’s Self that Can Be Improved and Developed”).

From another angle, revision works by building into the textual-production process time and space for further consideration of a writing problem by the writer, for garnering additional perspectives from other readers and collaborating writers, and for review of a draft against specific criteria (e.g., the directness of a claim or the strength of evidence for it). The expectation of revision—the building of time into a writing process (see 4.3, “Learning to Write Effectively Requires Different Kinds of Practice, Time, and Effort”)—creates both the opportunity for, and sometimes directed prompting for, looking at the text again, differently.

The threshold concept that revision is central to developing writing can be difficult in a number of ways. Novice or unreflective writers, especially students, may see revision as punishment for poor performance. Being told to write again or write more, especially if the assigned writing has little intrinsic value to the writer or is used primarily to judge them, may hardly seem like a positive opportunity. Teachers may heighten this effect by making revision optional (rather than every bit as expected a phase of the writer’s workflow as drafting) and even reserving the option only for weak pieces of writing. (“I let them revise if they get a low grade.”) Students, teachers, writers, and educational policymakers must understand the implication of this threshold concept: revising, or the need to revise, is not an indicator of poor writing or weak writers but much the opposite—a sign and a function of skilled, mature, professional writing and craft.

4.5

ASSESSMENT IS AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT OF LEARNING TO WRITE
Peggy O’Neill

Assessment is often associated with external mandates and formal accountability systems. Yet, assessment is also a critical component of writing and learning to write. Assessment conceived of in this way is not about grades, exams, or standardized tests but rather about teaching and learning (Shepard 2000). In writing, it is essential for writers to learn to assess texts written by others as well as their own work—both the processes used to create the texts and products that result. Brian Huot calls this pedagogical approach “instructive evaluation” and explains that it “involves the student in the process of evaluation, making her aware of what it is she is trying to create” and it “requires that we involve the student in all phases of the assessment of her work” (Huot 2002, 69).

In this sense, assessment is essential in all stages of the writing process. Through the prewriting, drafting, revision, editing, and publishing of a text, writers assess various components of the rhetorical situation as well