

ON WRITING by Morton D. Rich

EVERYTHING YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT REVISION BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK

Advice to Students

Do you know anyone who claims to write a perfect essay on the first try? Don't believe it! All of us revise everything we write for publication in order to present only our best work. Some writers intermix revision with composition, moving back and forth between the two processes, while others compose first and revise later. Whichever mode you favor, it is by revision that you produce clarity and elegance in your writing.

Revision can take place at the word, phrase, clause, sentence, paragraph, or whole essay levels. Whenever you *revise*, be aware that you are *re-seeing* your writing in order to allow your readers to see and engage with it better.

The following exhortations are intended as invitations to more conscious revision.

1. **Be strict with yourself.** When you sit down to revise, do that and nothing else. Don't smoke, drink, eat, look out the window, answer the phone or think about what you're doing next. Revision requires as much concentration as composing. Stick to your text and focus.

2. **Be compassionate.** What you wrote required dedication, knowledge, energy, time, training, and commitment. Treat your writing like a growing puppy that needs love, attention, and training. Don't think that because you didn't get it just right the first time that you can't write well.

3. **Be direct.** If something is not clear, rewrite the sentence or paragraph or the whole piece so that it is. Directness engages the reader and creates a partnership of understanding. If you make the reader guess at something, you create a break in attention.

4. **Be a partner.** Good writing invites a reader in as a participant in the construction of meaning. While you may know what you mean, your reader needs enough data, clues, and shapely syntax to work cooperatively with your writing and bring the form and content to life.

5. **Be shapely.** Form is at least as important as content. Let each sentence lead naturally to the next as a continuation, illustration, expansion, or elaboration of a line of thought. Vary the lengths of sentences to correspond to the intake rate of your ideal reader. Write paragraphs long enough to cover a block of thought, but not so long that a reader forgets the starting point. Let the last sentence of each paragraph contain a hook to the first sentence of the next paragraph. A hook can be a key word or phrase that provides continuity, either of an idea or an image.

6. **Be a strong starter.** First words receive the most attention, both in sentences and paragraphs. Do not hesitate to offer your best images and examples first; you can create more later. Ideas beget ideas.

7. **Be generous.** Give everything and hold back nothing. Empty yourself into each piece that you write. If you

hold back, you may create pockets of resistance in yourself where you have hoarded ideas and images that you thought you were saving for later. Complete emptying leads to refilling. Your reader knows.

8. **Be respectful.** Your reader is intelligent, thoughtful, discriminating, and appreciative. Do unto your reader as you would have done unto yourself. If you have doubts about any part of your work, imagine what your reader might think. Mutual respect promotes understanding.

9. **Be imaginative.** Picture yourself at the receiving end of your writing, or better yet, have someone read your work to you. Listen to your writing as if it were new to you and write notes and questions. Do not hesitate to question any aspect of your writing, large or small, that could benefit from revision. Listen without resistance to your reader's comments, even if some of them are wrong-headed or irrelevant, you can gain something.

10. **Be bold.** Remove words, sentences, whole paragraphs, then compare your revised work with the original. Often you will find that what you removed was redundant and interfered with the flow of your argument or presentation. Redundancy may be your way of seeking clarification, of ensuring that the reader really gets what you mean. A better way is to use the most precise word you can find.

11. **Be accurate.** This is the time to consult a dictionary, thesaurus, almanac, concordance, and other reference works in your field of study. At *The New Yorker* and other magazines, there are staffs dedicated to fact-checking in an in-house library. No writer, however famous, is exempt from having every essay closely checked for accuracy. Since you cannot call on a professional staff, you are obliged to be your own fact-checker. You need either to accumulate a set of reference books or schedule library time.

12. **Be enterprising.** Go where no one has gone before, to your own final frontier. Avoid basing your opinions on information (which may be misinformation) from the public media, unless you trust the source or have checked it independently. Invent hypotheses based on your best guesses and see where they lead you. Invention leads to exploration, which leads to discovery. Write something without being absolutely sure about it, watching where your thinking takes you. Revise for accuracy later.

13. **Be balanced.** While you must come down on one side of an issue, recognize the other side. Answer the arguments you expect to be mounted to counter yours, thereby strengthening your position.

14. **Be conclusive.** Revise your last paragraph so that it flows inevitably from all that came before. End with a strong statement or question that the reader will be required to think about. Think of how sonnets and symphonies end, with resolution and a sense of closure. Let the reader share your feeling of I HAVE SPOKEN.