Chapter 10. Revising From Feedback and Reflection

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Use a DEAL approach to engage in revision as a multifaceted, reflective process
- Incorporate feedback from other readers in balance with your own goals
- Explore strategies that help you re-see your writing and make significant improvements to a project
- Prepare to transfer what you've learned to your work on future writing projects

If you are a reflective writer whose goal is to improve not just a particular document but your skills and abilities as a writer, then you should also become a full-time reviser of writing. To avoid "writer's block," you will often write in an exploratory or experimental mode, and so you will need to be prepared to revise that writing for it to suit your final project. Moreover, to gain learning that transfers from one writing project to another, you need to take a reflective, rhetorical, holistic approach to revision.

10.1 Re-see Revision

As we know, research shows that revision isn't just for unsuccessful writers: All writers struggle and revise their writing. Revising can require different strategies for different writing tasks, from a quick glance at an email to a supervisor to be sure you are using the right tone and accurate data, to an extended reorganization of a capstone project for your degree program or an annual report for your organization. Indeed, if you sometimes find revising more difficult from composing, you're not imagining it, nor are you alone: revising requires different mental muscles, so many advanced writers find that we need to slow down and take revision a step at a time.

Revising is a kind of writing, and so it makes sense to consider how some key threshold concepts are relevant to revisers:

You can become a good writer and a better writer

You already have many viable writing skills, and you are capable of becoming a better writer and a competent writer of many kinds of texts.

There is no single definition of a "good writer"

Writers use different techniques or styles to produce "good writing" depending on the writer's goals and the audience's needs.

Good writers frequently struggle and revise

Since writing is difficult for many writers, and the expectations for success depend on the exact audience or context, a writer's main job is to persist through difficulty.

There are many ways to solve a writing problem

Because writing is complex and interactive, writers have many ways of getting stuck—and just as many ways of getting back on track.

Revising requires advanced thinking

Revising a complete or nearly complete draft is often more complicated than generating an initial draft, for three reasons.

First, revising is difficult because you must **negotiate prior constraints**. You might imagine a home designer who has a choice between adding a new dining room table to an empty house and adding the same table into a house that is fully furnished. When the house is already furnished, the designer will need to purchase a table that will fit in among all the other chairs, lamps, and couches; they

will also prefer a table that matches in size, color, and style to the furniture that is already chosen; finally, they may have to move some of the original furniture around or even take it out in order to make room.

Just as earlier decisions made about older furniture in a house constrain a designer's actions about the new dining room table, the early choices you made about your draft constrain the choices you make about revising it. Revisers have less room to move, so our problem-solving choices take more time and consideration.

Second, re-vision—literally, re-seeing your writing and imagining how it could be different—is difficult because it **requires new angles of thinking**. New angles are hard to create, because writers are so familiar with our original plans. Sometimes writers avoid new thinking: instead of revising, we quickly reread the original and, unless a random inspiration hits, we just edit, looking for single words or punctuation marks to fix. However, hoping for big change to come out of small efforts doesn't usually work, and it doesn't make much sense to edit a sentence to perfection only to discover you have to delete the whole paragraph it's in. Revisers have to deliberately seek out new ideas, and that takes brain power.

Finally, revision requires us to **confront weaknesses directly**. While nobody likes to admit failures, writers often know, deep down, where the shaky or off-topic parts of our projects are. When you are writing an early draft, you can work around these sticky spots or even ignore them. But when you revise, you need to face them honestly. Whole paragraphs might need to be deleted or rearranged; several paragraphs may need additional information; or a whole new point about the complexity of the situation may need to be added or restructured. Also, revisers know that just as the dining room decor should connect with the living room design, a change to one part of an essay usually necessitates changes to other parts.

As an advanced reviser, you have to head directly into the difficult spots, facing your writing challenges and reflecting on exact ways to respond to them, rather than dodging and hoping nobody will notice. By focusing on what you know is difficult for yourself as an advanced writer, you can use your revision process as an ongoing learning opportunity, and seek to improve the writing that most needs it. The best part about revising is that when you can trust yourself as a reviser, you lower the stress and frustration of writing your early draft.

Revising benefits from reflective practice

Using reflective practice as you revise helps increase your ownership and agency in regard to your writing: rather than only "fixing" parts of your writing that other people told you were broken, you can learn to improve your current document so that it matches your goals, addresses your exact rhetorical

context, and reflects your values. Reflection as a reviser is also crucial to developing a long view: reflection helps you identify principles and strategies that you can use in future writing projects. The more thorough your reflection as you revise, the better you will be able to reflect to predict the challenges and opportunities of your next writing project.

Whether you are working on current draft improvements or your long-term strategic planning, you can use the same DEAL structure. You should always start by defining what has been working well for you in the current project and what you see as key challenges: you may be aided by feedback from other writers, but you should strive to align any recommendations with the goals and principles that are important to you. As you revise a current draft, you can then explore multiple ways that you could improve your document, act by making significant changes rather than only small edits, and identify what you have learned from writing and revising this project.
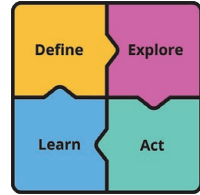
But don't stop there: To improve overall as a writer, you will want to take that project-based learning and look ahead: explore and predict how your new skills may be useful on future writing tasks, and actively plan for those tasks by adjusting (or reinforcing) your writing principles and your go-to strategies. The more you articulate your learning from your current project, the stronger a writer you will become overall.

Explore 10.1

Think back to a writing project recently where you completed significant revisions, and write 3-5 sentences to describe that revision situation.
How did external factors—the type of document you were composing, the expectations of an instructor or supervisor, the high- or low-stakes of the task—affect your decisions about revising? How did more internal factors, such as your confidence and motivation, your skills and preferences, your time and your goals as a writer, affect your revisions? Finish with a sentence about the outcome: Were you generally satisfied with your revisions, or do you wish that they had gone differently?

Learn

- To learn more about **drafting**, see Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft.
- To learn more about **reflecting**, see Chapter 4, Reflecting Throughout Your Writing Process.
- To learn more about **identifying your writing principles**, see Chapter 12, Creating Your Writing Theory.

10.2 Evaluate Your Feedback and Plan Your Revisions

As the author of a draft, you always have insider knowledge about what you want to accomplish, what your resources are, and what your overall priorities are. In many cases, you also know more about your specific topic or issue than your reader (or some angles of it), even when your reader is an instructor, professor, or manager. You are the authority.

However, in most of the situations in which you are seeking or receiving feedback, your document's success is measured in large part or completely by the judgment of the audience. Just as your Aunt Margaret holds you responsible if your troublesome cousin runs away at the shopping mall and gets lost for an hour, readers in US academic and professional cultures hold a writer responsible for making all the ideas clear to them.

As you revise based on feedback, then, you have to balance your knowledge and abilities with the perceptions, requests, and even demands you receive from readers. Feedback from readers may occur along a continuum from not at all relevant to precisely what you needed: comments may be:

- Unclear, vague, or irrelevant
- Clear but not obviously accurate: you might not agree that there is a problem, that the problem is what the reader thinks, or that their solution will work with your purpose or audience
- Clear and accurate, but too difficult to implement given your abilities or resources
- Clear, accurate, and possible to implement in a modified way
- Clear, accurate, and possible to implement just as suggested
- Clear, accurate, and possible to implement even more broadly throughout the document than was suggested

You have to decide which comments fit which category, and thus how you will respond to each comment. Even a half-hearted reviewer can still give a few useful comments; even a really great reviewer will sometimes provide some unhelpful feedback. As the author, you are and remain the authority on your project, and you are charge of choosing which feedback will influence your revision process.

Finally, as you revise based on feedback, you need to reflect on the bigger picture: if you make a single change in response to one reader's comments, you need to check on how that change affects other parts of the project. Your reviewers won't always keep all those variables in mind, but you know your project well enough to choose your revisions both for how they improve the small facets and how they will help you build a stronger document overall, in light of your goals and your readers' needs.

Incorporate feedback from expert coaches

In the past when you have had an instructor provide feedback on your writing, you may have had a correction-based relationship: the instructor identified errors, and you assumed that your role was to take every single comment as direct information about how to change a specific word or sentence.

As you move into more advanced writing tasks, that relationship will most likely change (though it's always good to ask your instructor, supervisor, or reviewer what your responsibilities are). For instance, you may encounter experts who do not correct all of your errors, but who instead identify some general areas of writing problems, and who then expect you to assess that information, adapt it in light of your own understanding of the goals and needs of the project, and use it to continue revising multiple areas in your overall document.

When you respond to expert coaching on your writing, you should certainly try to follow any direct suggestions provided: "make this argument more specific" or "add more evidence from the text here." However, you are moving from being someone who *corrects small errors* to becoming someone who *improves as a writer overall*, so you will need to adopt broader strategies:

- **Identify a range of possible responses** to any suggestion, so that you can choose the one that best fits your context and goals: not only are there many ways to "make a thesis more specific," but perhaps the problem is not really in the thesis sentence but in the overall topic or question that needs narrowing down. Don't use someone else's suggestion, even an instructor's, unless you're sure it's the best fit for your essay.

- **Extrapolate from individual suggestions** to your overall project: if your reader has asked in one place for more specific evidence, you now have an indication of a reader for whom that criterion is vitally important. Where else in the draft might you increase your level of evidence support?

- **Extrapolate from individual praise** to your overall project: if your reader has praised an example, phrasing, or kind of analysis, try to describe to yourself what made that selection stand out, and look for places to repeat that success elsewhere in your draft.

- **Be ready to discuss alternatives:** in some cases—an instructor with very direct expectations, a report that must follow a very specific format—there is no option for variation. In many other situations, however, you may inquire and discover that a reader is open to alternative approaches to organizing your document, or that they are intrigued by your plan to include a fuller discussion of unexpected data.

In a school setting and in many workplace settings, expert reviewers are willing to answer your questions about their feedback; they're often willing to hear the

reasons you think you might try an approach different from the one they recommend, as long as you can support your explanation by describing how it solves your writing problems more directly and completely. The more you are willing to open a dialogue about writing and revising, the more quickly you can learn advanced strategies for succeeding in your classroom or workplace.

Explore 10.2

In a sentence or two, describe the best advice or feedback you ever received about your writing: what was your writing task, and what was the feedback? Give an example of how you used that feedback to improve your writing at the time. Then consider the bigger picture: how can that advice, or an adaptation of that advice, help in your writing today—for school, for work, and/or for connecting with your friends or community?

Incorporate feedback from actual users

When your reader is actually a member of your target audience, then the feedback they give you might tell you precisely what some members of your audience will need from your document. Perhaps you have written a brochure for a child services organization and given a draft to the manager for that organization, or you have created a web page directed to incoming college students and asked three of your sister's high school friends to review it.

When the feedback is within the readers' area of expertise, the readers are fully representative of your audience, and the comments are clearly stated, you should strive to revise accordingly. If the high school friends tell you that your opening story about music concerts is "old style" and nobody listens to those bands any more, you should take their advice seriously and ask for suggestions. However, if they tell you that your statistics about college-level study skills are wrong, you might be more skeptical, because they have less expertise in that area. If the child services manager tells you their clients will like the information in the brochure you designed but that the pictures convey a "negative vibe," you should trust that feedback; if the manager can't exactly say what pictures they prefer, you might follow up by sharing some possible examples to help them articulate their goals.

As a corollary to this advice, you should learn to value any reader's input for what that reader is best equipped to tell you about your document—and to directly seek out or ask readers for what they can most help you revise. Your class peers will be more reliable at identifying writing challenges and concepts you have just been studying, and so you should value their comments on such matters, and your colleagues at work will be able to tell you whether people in a busy workplace can follow a set of instructions. Likewise, if you want to find out whether a non-specialist can understand your description of cell mitosis or wind shear, you need to find a non-specialist, such as your grandmother or your tennis partner.

Incorporate feedback from general readers

You have probably experienced some of the benefits and challenges of having a friend, class member, or officemate "just take a look" at your writing. While they can provide useful insights, you may also decide that their comments are too general or not relevant enough to be immediately helpful. Instead of concluding that these reviews are useless, though, you need to develop strategies for identifying how to take advantage of these readers' support.

It may help to think of how people respond to smoke alarms. A smoke alarm sounds to let you know that there is a serious problem somewhere in your building: in the most serious cases, a fire has started somewhere and smoke has drifted to the alarm, while in other cases, steam or other air qualities have triggered the alarm to sound. A fully functioning smoke alarm identifies but does not pinpoint a problem, since the alarm may sound in the hallway when the fire (or burned pan of rice) is in the kitchen.

A reader's feedback may function as a smoke alarm, particularly if the reader is a peer, friend, colleague, or layperson. Readers who are honest and thoughtful are often able to tell you that your document is not working to its full potential; *something* about your writing affects them negatively. However, they may be unable to pinpoint where the problem is, they may pinpoint one problem when the true source of the problem is elsewhere, or their problem sensors may be tuned too strictly or too gently given your context. These readers may provide "smoke alarm" comments in the following categories, and advanced writers will need to sort the comments out before beginning revisions.

Vague comments

Inexperienced or nonspecialist readers may provide comments such as "this doesn't flow" or "you should be more personal" or "too many quotations" that are imprecise. However, as a reflective writer you can work to interpret these comments to better define, explore, and act on any problems. The three comments above might refer to a lack of clarity in your goal statements or paragraph structure; to the low amount of supporting detail or a flatness to your tone and style; or to a problem with your analysis of the secondary source information that you included. You can try to imagine what was frustrating your reader, and locate at least one place in your draft where you can explore ways to strengthen your writing to satisfy their concerns while meeting your goals and the other rhetorical demands of your project.

Mistuned comments

Peer readers unfamiliar with the expectations of your genre, your target audience's background knowledge, or your goals may ask for you to make revisions

that seem inappropriate: "add more stories to your intro," or "explain what *deconstruction* means," or "don't spend so much time explaining multiple views." If readers are mistaken (memos and lab reports are not supposed to begin with stories), then you can ignore their feedback. However, to make sure the alarm won't go off again with another reader, you might wonder if you can make any small changes that would accommodate readers' needs: perhaps you could include a slightly more engaging "Subject" line in your memo or more vivid verbs in your abstract.

A common subset of these comments is the correction of sentence-level errors when you were hoping for more macro-level feedback from peers. If you are not yet ready to work on sentence-level editing, or if readers "correct" sentences and in doing so produce more errors, you should just read around this type of feedback. (And remember: Don't get tricked into editing when you're still in revising mode!)

Generalized praise

If you see specific praise—"This quotation persuades me to donate money because the statistic is so dramatic"—you know what the reader believes you have done right. If you see vague praise—"I get it!"—or if an instructor only makes a checkmark or smiley face in the margin, you may not know. Vague praise isn't always an alarm that signals a disaster, but it can also require interpretation and scrutiny. Sometimes readers praise you for making them happy, not for challenging them to think hard or for meeting the goals of the writing project, just as sometimes a smoke detector goes off when there's water boiling or the oven door opens.

When you see praise, your first job is to decide whether you are being praised for achieving your main goal. If you think you are, because the commentary is specific or because you trust the source (your instructor would not praise something unworthy!), then your next task is to decide for yourself what you were doing right, so that you can do more of that. Make your best guess and write yourself a note: "Keep using specific quotations" or "Keep adding more counterarguments" or "Keep incorporating more outlying data points."

If you think your reader is liking something more generally, then your task is to decide whether you can translate that praise to a useful category so that you can search for other places to repeat your strong writing ("I relate to this" may indicate the presence of highly specific detail or of accessible language), or whether your reader is admiring something as a novice reader that your target audience would not admire ("I relate to this" may indicate that you are telling stories that engage novices when your target audience of mechanical engineers expects you to be providing data-supported analysis).

Explore 10.3

As I was writing this textbook, I received comments from *dozens* of reviewers. I admit that my first reaction to a reviewer's critique was often, "What? But that part is *perfect*! Why do they not recognize my genius?!" Then I took a deep breath and settled in to see how I could make my writing better.

Consider a recent a writing project of yours, and identify some feedback you received that you didn't quite agree with, at least at first. What writing task were you working on, and what did the feedback say? (If you don't have a copy to check, try to recall as specifically as possible what your goals were and what the comments were.) Then try a thought experiment: in a couple of sentences, explain how that reader's reaction, if not their exact comment, could help you revise your writing to more effectively reach your audience.

Incorporate feedback from reflection

If you must be your only reviewer or you are a major source of feedback for your own draft, you face some significant challenges. Writers tend to be either hypercritical or highly complimentary of our own writing, neither of which promotes good revision. You should thus begin by learning reflective strategies for reviewing your own drafts so that you can see beyond your first (and second) impressions.

Once you have assessed your draft and provided yourself with both praises and suggestions, you will still need to take your own advice carefully. On the one hand, you are the authority on your topic or issue and on the work you have done so far, and you need to reassure yourself that you have the power and capability to complete these revisions. On the other hand, you are only human, and so if you are not vigilant, you may slip back into old habits that produce less powerful writing (another reason not to revise at two in the morning!). As you look at your self-praises and suggestions, then, take some steps to rearrange your brain and add a few more notes:

- **Recall what you have typically done** as a writer that helped you succeed, and typically done as a writer that was not helpful. If one of your past writing selves (maybe from six weeks ago, or last year) were to look at your draft and your revision suggestions, what would they say: are you about to make any of the same mistakes you've made before? is there something you always try that helps that you should try again?
- **Step into someone else's perspective** for a few minutes: what would a current or former teacher, boss, or friend say about your draft or your suggestions? What sorts of comments does that person often make that you can imagine them making here? What specifically has been asked for by a boss or instructor in this situation that relates to your plans for revision?

- **Become a critic of your critique**: which of your praises or suggestions sounds like you are just trying to let yourself off the hook too easily, either by telling yourself that you don't need to change or by telling yourself that the change would be too difficult? Are there any places where you over-looked or understated a change that needs to be more drastic or needs to happen more often?

- **Become a cheerleader for your revisions**: which of your praises could you strengthen, now that you remember how hard you worked on the early draft and how much you want to keep working on that strategy? Which revision suggestion sounds like something you really want to explore, ex-pand, or even take some risks with to see if you can break new ground and capture your readers' attention?

Even if you think you'll remember what you want to do, when you take the time to actually write these notes-to-self, then you benefit even more because you start the revision process before you start revising, and you retrain your brain to visu-alize the new draft rather than staying caught in the current one.

10.3 Complete Significant Revisions

Since revising is challenging, and since writers often feel we did about as well as we could in the current draft, we often have difficulty completing significant revisions. The draft looks "fine" to us, so we make a small change to a para-graph and hope that that will be enough to satisfy our readers—even though several readers wanted more details throughout the essay. Or we tinker with the thesis sentence and tell ourselves that that will suffice to create a stronger argument, even though we suspect that several paragraphs don't quite match the new thesis. Not only is it easy for writers to get attached to an early draft and hard for us to envision changes, but whether we have spent five days or just five hours working on a project, we sometimes just cannot imagine com-ing back to work on it even one more minute. However, reflective writers can employ deliberate, reflective strategies to help us overcome the challenges of revision, so we can improve our current project and gain additional perspec-tive on our writing overall.

Explore 10.4

Revisers often work in one or more of four modes: *add* new material, *move* material around, *change* material where it is, or *delete* material from your document. List these four from what you think is *easiest* for you to do as a reviser to what is *hardest* for you to do. Write 2-3 sentences explaining why you ordered your list that way, and give at least one example from a recent project to support your decision.

Treat revising as a new event

- Open a **new document** or fresh composing surface, and begin by composing a new outline or pasting into that space only the material you most want to keep from the previous document. (Sometimes this approach is easier than trying to move pieces around or draw arrows and circles in an old document.)

- Open and save a **new version of your document** under an experimental title—Project2TrialVersion3—to give yourself permission to "go out on a limb" with a new approach for an hour or two (or for a day or two), while the earlier version remains unharmed.

- Explore a **new line of inquiry**, either by expanding a tiny subtopic you barely mentioned before, responding to a reviewer's question that opens up a new angle, or taking off on a wild tangent for 20-30 minutes just to see if it turns up anything that could spark a reorientation or reinvigoration of your draft.

Treat revising as a creative event

- **Involve color or displays**: you can use highlighters (or a highlight feature on screen) to color-code the points and sub-points that organize your document, to help you see how you might better arrange them. You can also print and cut apart your draft so you can rearrange it on your desk— or you can photograph or screenshot each section, paste them into a new document or to a social network board, and drag the parts around to experiment with new ways to arrange them.

- **Try new voices or genres**: open a page or document where you can play with your approach to see what ideas that sparks: try writing part of your draft in another voice, in another format or genre, or to another audience. Or do all three: draw your main message as the start of a picture book for kindergarteners, write it as the opening scene of a documentary movie, or dictate parts of it into your phone as if you were telling a friend who lives far away or studies in a different field from yours. Even if you try something that is completely different from what you are supposed to be doing, you might be able to see the key elements from a useful perspective.

Treat revising as a deliberate event

- **Create a to-do list** and experiment with the order of tasks. For instance, you could write the most important or most difficult revision you need to do up at the start of your list, followed by the next most important,

followed by the next. (Alternately, you could arrange these revisions alphabetically.) Instead of going through your draft start to finish—editing a sentence here, moving a paragraph there—solve all of one problem and then move on to the next one on your list. If you get stuck, skip to the next problem (because sometimes fixing a different problem will help in an unforeseen way), but don't forget to come back!

- Set a **document goal** for yourself, even an extreme one: aim to add or cut 500 words; aim to take all your arguments one step further out on a limb; or aim to add one more piece of credible evidence to every paragraph.

- Set yourself a **personal learning goal**: aim to understand the statistics behind hedge fund trading so you can better explain your reasoning in paragraph four; aim to try three organizational structures to learn which one fits your project best; aim to try a more direct argumentation strategy than you usually use so that you better match the approach of the discourse community you're joining.

Treat revising as any other reflect-and-improve event

Identify any of your strengths and resources as a writer, generally and in this project, that you can draw on as you revise. The exercises below may provide you with some starting points, but you don't need to limit yourself. What other resources can you seek out?

Practice

- To practice revising while considering your **rhetorical situation**, see Audience/Stakeholder Mapping, Boil Down, or Emperor for a Day.

- To practice revising by using **new perspectives**, see Audience Switch, Genre Switch, or Stance Switch.

- To practice revising while considering your **subject-matter knowledge**, see Assumption Inspection, Evidence Shopping List, or Gray-Area Finder.

- To practice revising while considering your **steps and strategies** (even when you typically think of some actions as "prewriting" rather than "revising"), see Seven Generations or Six Structures.

- To practice revising by **adding or deleting ideas**, see Add/Move/Change/Delete, Best and Better, Expand and Narrow, Explode a Moment, Inside Out, or Shrunken Draft.

- To practice revising while considering your **dispositions**, see Letter to Kermit, Six Degrees, or Values Freewrite.

Save editing for a separate step

Writing scholars sometimes refer to editing at the sentence and word level as addressing "lower order concerns," that should be addressed separately from significant revision work. Partly that is because while fixing errors and selecting precise language will make reading easier, those small changes generally won't improve the core thinking that gives your document its power. Even instructors who are quick to mark comma errors in red ink will likely say that good thinking with a few errors is preferable to sloppy thinking with zero errors. Also, these concerns are "lower" because they should be addressed last: there's not much sense fixing a semi-colon if you really need to delete the whole sentence or paragraph.

Finally, it's important to separate out editing so that you don't distract yourself from revising. Since revising requires a significant amount of reflection, honesty, and complex analysis of the rhetorical situation, it can feel like climbing a steep hill—while light editing can seem like an easy flat trail through the cool woods. As a result, you may find yourself changing a word here and there, shortening one sentence and lengthening another one, fixing your typos or formatting the caption of a graph as a way of procrastinating on the challenging work of revising. If this happens, you should gently nudge your brain back to the main task until most of your revisions are complete. Alternately, sometimes editing can be its own steep hill: if you struggle to meet your readers' expectations of "correct" writing, or if you have been told that because of your sentences you are "not a good writer," then you might expend a lot of time and emotional energy on small changes, without leaving enough brain power to work on key revisions.

When you're revising, focus on revising; gaining practice as a reviser will help you not just on your current document, but in all of your future writing projects.

> **Learn**
>
> - To learn more about **editing** after you revise, see <u>Chapter 11, Editing in Context</u>.
> - To learn more about **citing sources** after you revise, see <u>Chapter 22, Integrating and Acknowledging Sources</u>.

Look ahead to transfer what you've learned

The final step of the DEAL process for revising your project is "Look and learn": what happened in this project that you want to carry forward? You don't have to stop with a quick note about how "next time I'll procrastinate less"; you can take the opportunity to consider your core principles, key strategies, and likely goals so that you can improve your writing self as well as your current document.

If you are working on a writing theory, then your forward-looking reflections will be crucial steps in understanding what principles and strategies are most important to you. However, even if you are not formally studying your own writing, you will benefit from taking time to

identify strategies that were either very successful or approaches that didn't end up being productive—and to envision yourself using better strategies in a future setting.

To start, step back and **define** what you learned: not just what you decided about "how to get this task done by the deadline," but about writing and about yourself as a writer more generally. You might consider what you learned about adapting to a rhetorical situation, how you came to have better analysis or assumption-checking strategies to support your subject-knowledge, what kinds of steps and strategies were useful to you, or the ways you told yourself a new story to help cope with disposition problems.

You might also check back on any earlier reflective writing you did: How accurate were your predictions about the challenges and the resources needed for this project? What writing problems did you address successfully as you composed? What advice did you give yourself or your peers as you reviewed your document or theirs that might be applicable to other writing situations?

Next, **explore** the kinds of future writing you might do. You should consider tasks that are very similar—such as transferring writing knowledge from your first physics lab report to your second—as well as tasks that are much more distant in type or time. Besides lab reports, what other kinds of formal or informal writing will you be doing soon? If you imagine yourself a year from now, or five years from now, what might you be writing? Once you've listed a few "near transfer" and "far transfer" options like these, identify some approaches you think could be useful for each one.

Although you won't exactly **act** on your ideas yet, you need to prepare to act. Reflective writers finishing up a project may find that poet and novelist Maya Angelou's advice to media mogul Oprah Winfrey feels relevant: "You did [back then] what you knew how to do, and when you knew better, you did better." Yet knowing and doing are different things: if *thinking about improvement* were enough to ensure that improvement happened, every writer who ever said "I shouldn't have procrastinated on my project so long!" would magically start writing in plenty of time.

You may find it useful to set one or two "smart" goals for your next time writing. These are goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timebound.

- To be specific, measurable, and achievable, your goal needs to match your *writing* life. Instead of saying "I will never procrastinate again!" or "I need way more analysis than I first think," you can narrow down to a task you

can see yourself doing as a writer on a particular day: "When I get a writing assignment, I will spend 10 minutes making notes on the assignment directions about the key goals and challenges" or "In my future writing, I will include at least one 'because' or 'therefore' sentence in each main paragraph." Choose goals that you know you can accomplish as a writer.

- To be relevant and timebound, your goal needs to match your *actual* life. If you make a goal based on someone else's values or definitions, or if you make a goal that "someday" you may achieve, you will be less likely to complete that goal. Look for ways to articulate your goal so that it fits realistically with who you are: "*Because I am more confident when I know the rules*, when I receive *my very next* writing assignment, I will spend 10 minutes *that day* making notes about the key goals and challenges" or "*In my upcoming case study review*, I will include at least one 'because' or 'therefore' sentence in each main draft *so that I show how much I truly know about the issue*."

Your goal in all of this work is to ensure that your **learning** as a writer doesn't fade away. We know that writers (and students and parents and professionals) suffer from cognitive overload and too many distractions, and so when we don't pay attention to some part of our life, sometimes it just slips away. When your goal is not simply to survive one writing task at a time, but to thrive as an advanced, reflective writer, these final steps are crucial. You revise your document, but then you should also revise your writing self, even just a little bit, so that the next time you encounter a writing task—in a class, on the job, or just in a dark alley some evening—you don't flinch and shrink away, but instead step forward and say "I've got a plan for what to do next."