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FRESHMAN WRITERS AND REVISION: RESULTS FROM A SURVEY

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

Our paper reports the results of a survey on revision which we conducted among students in the composition program at the University of Pittsburgh. Our survey sought three kinds of information: what these students had been taught about revision in high school; how these students say they use revision in the writing process; and what values these students attach to revision. We ran a pilot study in the Fall of 1978 with 150 students and then administered the final, formal study in the Fall of 1979, obtaining 248 complete sets of responses from students in twenty-two composition classes.

The survey was administered over three days in five parts. Part "A" surveyed the kinds of discourse which our subjects had been assigned as writing tasks in high school. "B" surveyed how these students had been taught to revise. "C" asked students how often they typically use revising and other related strategies during the writing process. "D" surveyed the values which our subjects associate with various reasons to revise. And "E" was a set of short essay questions. In addition, there was an information sheet to find out the number and kinds of English courses our subjects had taken in high school, dividing these into straight

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composition courses, straight literature courses, and courses in which both literature and composition were taught.

The results of the survey were analyzed according to the sections in which these students had been placed when they entered the University. These placements were made on the basis of the Nelson-Denny test and performance on a holistically scored essay. There were four sections representing relative levels of writing ability: Basic Reading and Writing (about 8 to 10 percent of all entering students place at this most basic level); Basic Writing; General Writing (our course for the "average" first-year student); and Advanced General Writing. The appropriateness of these placements had been confirmed by individual instructors by the third week of classes when the survey was administered. All our subjects were day students, and all were freshmen except for eleven older students in Advanced General Writing. Very few were speakers of English as a second language or of non-standard dialects.

A survey such as this has some important limitations. A survey is a self-report. It will not tell us what writers actually do when they write, only what they think they do, as that is filtered through their feelings about sharing their thoughts with a researcher. Therefore, responses such as "often," "sometimes," "seldom," and "never," cannot make absolute comparisons of behavior among groups, only comparisons of relative levels of familiarity with certain kinds of experiences. And, of course, a survey which reports results as percentages deals only in averages, and there is no such person as the "average" writer, at any level of ability. Nevertheless, this kind of research may be helpful for those times when faculty must generalize, such as when they create assignments, conduct class discussions, or refine their methods of placement.

RESULTS: HIGH SCHOOL BACKGROUND

One general conclusion we have drawn from our results is that there have been serious deficiencies in our subjects' instructional backgrounds. When we asked, for example, the amount of time spent on learning about the writing process, we found that about three-quarters of these students, 76.1 percent, had taken either no straight composition courses at all or less than one year of such instruction. Only slightly more than half, 52.4 percent, had taken more than one year of English courses in which composition was taught in conjunction with literature. When class time had been devoted to composition instruction, it was the experience of three-fifths of these students, 60.5 percent, that revision was either seldom or never discussed.

There were serious deficiencies in the amount and kinds of writing these students have done. Part "A" of the survey asked students how often they had done sixteen kinds of writing assignments in high school. Our categories covered a range of writing tasks, from short essays and letters to more ambitious projects such as skits or term papers, and they represented writing in all four modes of discourse: expressive, explanatory, persuasive, and literary. When we considered a response of either "often" or "sometimes" as indicating at least some familiarity with a type of assignment, we found that nine out of the sixteen kinds of assignments were familiar to 50 percent or more of our subjects, six out of sixteen were familiar to 63 percent or more, and only two, letters and personal essays, were familiar to 85 percent or more. Expressive discourse tasks were the most familiar, followed by explanatory ones. Persuasive discourse had been especially short-changed: with the exception of the nine freshmen in Advanced General Writing (an unusual group in many ways), only about a third of those surveyed, 36.1 percent, were familiar with the writing of argument papers, and only about one-fourth, 25.9 percent, with critical essays. Recent results from the 1979 National Assessment of Writing bear out our findings: "Judgments about specific writing skills of seventeen-year-olds indicated that the ability to write narratives...improved dramatically from 1974 to 1979. Three-quarters of the seventeen-year-olds wrote competent narratives in 1979. Persuasive writing ability declined between 1974 and 1979, while performance on an explanatory business letter and a humorous letter remained stable."¹

Our students' unfamiliarity with persuasive discourse appears to be part of a different problem—their lack of experience with what we call "situational" writing, writing for which there is a real, specific audience being addressed, as with speeches or plays which will actually be given or performed, or newspaper articles or descriptions which writers share with their peers. Revision is often a central part of these writing tasks because a writer writing for a specific context and an immediate audience often has an opportunity to discover first-hand that what he said did not produce the imagined effect on the audience, or that what others observed does not correspond to what he feels he said. In this way, revision does indeed become re-vision, a "re-seeing" of what was said. Exposure to and

¹National Assessment of Educational Progress, "Good News, Bad News Mix in Third NAEP Writing Survey" *NAEP Bulletin* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1981). See also Arthur N. Applebee, *A Study of Writing in the Secondary Schools*. (Washington, D.C.: Final Report, NIE-G-79-0174, 1980).

practice in these kinds of writings are important if students are to have a chance to learn that language is an interpretation of the world, not merely a reflection of it.

There is another kind of “re-seeing” that involves a change of general ideas in the course of time, when the writer undergoes “a change of mind” or “reformulation” of his position. Sometimes this change happens quickly. But a great many professional writers have testified to the need for time to get away from a piece of writing, to achieve a new perspective or sense of “distance” before any re-vision can take place. And here, again, our results are discouraging. Although three-quarters of our subjects said that the period of time typically spent on a paper in high school was often or sometimes more than a day, the same number had seldom or never spent more than a week on writing tasks other than term papers. Furthermore, it was very unusual for these students to have been given any sequenced assignments, that is, assignments which asked them to explore a subject in depth by reconsidering papers they had already written, and even more unusual for them to have been given a grade only after a set or series of assignments had been completed. So while we cannot say that ideas were not being questioned and re-examined in their English classes, we can say that there was little in their initial writing tasks to encourage these students to do this re-seeing on their own.

Another way a writer can be encouraged to re-examine what he has written is through the help of a good reader. Here our results are mixed. 41.9 percent of these writers had often or sometimes shared their papers with other students in their classes, either before or after the paper was submitted to their teachers. Furthermore, in response to the essay question, “Describe what you learned in high school from a teacher who helped you understand revision in a new and important way,” nearly three-quarters of those surveyed, 72.7 percent, gave positive answers. And we found it heartening that in all but about 10 percent of these responses there was reference to some kind of revision other than just editing for errors. It is less certain, however, that these students have been regularly motivated to revise by their teachers. Just about half have often or sometimes been required to correct their errors. But about 70 percent were seldom or never required to do any other kind of revision, nor were they offered the incentive of a better grade if they did. More had been encouraged to revise without any actual requirement to do so, but only 13.2 percent experienced such encouragement often. These discouraging figures are matched by ones which show that about 70 percent of these writers seldom or never met with their teachers in conference or even submitted a working draft for reaction and advice.

What we see here is more than a matter of the lack of application of a few pedagogical techniques. What the vast majority of these students have not been given is role models to serve as examples of how experienced writers revise and how they talk about and value revision. In most cases the teachers of these students have not fulfilled that role, in class or out of class, nor have they offered examples of professional writers' revisions which might partially make up for it. The National Assessment reported that although "revision skills are often considered to be the essence of good writing,"² most college students that are poorly prepared have not been taught how to revise so as to meet the expectations of college-level academic discourse.

RESULTS: COMPARISONS OF LEVELS OF WRITING ABILITY

The concerns we have expressed about high school instruction stem in part from the way in which sophistication about the writing process seems to be related to level of writing ability. Our survey results show that, on the whole, the better writers among our subjects, the students in General Writing and Advanced General Writing, both know more about writing and have more strategies for writing and revising at their command than do the writers in the two sections of Basic Writing. Moreover, the better writers have picked the specific topics of their papers for themselves more often than the basic writers, and they have more often spent more than a day and, occasionally, more than a week on a given assignment. They have more strategies for invention: the basic writers often start papers by just beginning to write on the first idea that comes to mind and seeing what happens; the better writers know this strategy, too, but more of them say that they also sometimes think a long time before beginning to write and sometimes even write extensive notes or an outline. The better writers say they pause more often while they write to reread or to plan what to say next, and they stop more often to revise, whether they pause after a sentence, a section, or a whole draft. Understandably, then, the better writers more often make a lot of changes in what they write before their work is handed in. They are more concerned than the basic writers with the reader's reactions to their writing, and, going along with this, they are more attentive to using revision in order to improve sentence style, to eliminate errors, and to cut out redundancy in their writing.

The better writers we surveyed have not necessarily had more writing

²National Assessment of Educational Progress, *Write! Rewrite: An Assessment of Revision Skills*. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1977).

courses than the basic writers, nor do they say that they have spent appreciably more class time discussing revision. But what they have done is develop greater familiarity with more kinds of writing tasks. If we say that a group as a whole is “familiar” with a particular type of assignment when 75 percent or more say that they have done it often or sometimes, then we find that the students in Basic Reading and Writing are familiar at the end of high school with only two kinds of writing assignments, the “general writers” with four, and the older writers in Advanced General Writing with six. Not surprisingly, the better writers also do more writing on their own, what Janet Emig calls “self-sponsored” writing.³

We do not mean to suggest, however, that in all cases “more” is “better.” We also have to consider relationships between behavior and values on the one hand and the demands of task and situation on the other. Common sense suggests that not all strategies work equally well in all circumstances, that one does not write the same way or for the same reasons when composing, say, a long research paper as one does when composing a poem or an impromptu essay. Nor does the writer come to every writing task the same person; we all have our bad and good days, our times when writing comes easily and times when it seems difficult or blocked. And to the extent that we share the values of the academic world, we value writing as a way of discovering new ideas, not simply as a means to communicate what we already know. For all these reasons we want to suggest that flexibility about using options may be as important for the good writer as sophistication about which options are available to use. It is when we look at our data in this way that the most dramatic differences among the five groups emerge.

Advanced General Writing: 2. The upperclassmen in Advanced General Writing (abbreviated here as AGW2) stand out from the other groups in many ways. For one, they give themselves a lot to work with. More than any other group they say that they usually think a long time before beginning to write, spend time on their papers, write two or more drafts, and add a lot to what they have written. They usually see a lot of changes, too, in what they write before it is finished; but there is a definite pattern as well to how these changes are made. The AGW2 writers most frequently pause to plan, to reread, and to consider revision after they have completed sections of their papers; they pause less often for these

³Janet Emig. *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*. (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1971).

reasons at the end of a draft, and even less often after just a sentence or two. More than the writers in the other groups, they say they like to rearrange the order of sentences and whole sections of their papers. These responses suggest that these older writers concentrate their revising efforts on “chunks” of prose, moving them around and adding more where it seems necessary or where new ideas are generated in the process. This would explain how they can say that they usually make extensive changes in what they write while, at the same time, seeming to pause and to revise less often than the writers in the other groups. We would suggest, then, that these writers can be described as flexible in the way that they regularly put themselves in a position to deal with middle-level ideas “beyond the sentence,” while they are sophisticated enough about writing to know that revision of whole drafts or even multiple drafts may on occasion be necessary.

We see flexibility, too, in the way these AGW2 students exercise the range of options available to sophisticated writers. They take more risks than the writers in the other groups by using such strategies as starting a paper by “just beginning;” stopping and starting over; cutting substantial amounts; rearranging whole sections; and writing multiple drafts, that is, more than two. But they also seem to adjust these strategies to the writing situation: they say they exercise all of these options sometimes, rather than usually, seldom, or never.

We cannot, of course, say what caused these writers to become so flexible; but we can speculate on some possible influences from their backgrounds. Of all the groups we studied, these students were the ones with the most high school experience in discussing revision in class and in discussing their final drafts in student-teacher conferences—responses which are probably linked to the fact that they had taken more straight composition courses in high school than had any other group. AGW2 was the only group in which even half had seen examples of professional writers’ revisions, and the only group whose answers to survey questions indicated that they had had previous experience with persuasive discourse as well as explanatory or expressive discourse. These students were also unusual in that half of them named multiple categories of self-sponsored writing (e.g., poetry, journal, and newspaper articles), responses which suggest familiarity with adult models for writing.

The responses of these students also suggest a relationship among level of writing ability, self-sponsored writing, and the kinds of revision a writer does for school-sponsored writing. For the five groups studied, the higher the level of ability, the more there were differences in revising between students who did self-sponsored writing and those who did not.

The differences were the most striking among the AGW2 students. Those in this group who did some sort of self-sponsored writing were much more familiar than the other writers in their group with making extensive revisions in their school-sponsored papers and with that process of exploration and discovery that Donald Murray calls "internal revision."⁴ They say, for example, that they often add new ideas after reading over what they have written, even taking something from a previous draft and exploring it further. They also say that they attach a much higher value to "internal revision" for school-sponsored writing than the other members of their group.

We do not mean to suggest that extensive revision is necessarily a good thing or that discovery is always the good writer's purpose in revising. What we are saying here is that for some writers, as Richard Beach has suggested,⁵ extensive revising may be closely tied to a use of revision for the purposes of invention throughout the writing process. Among the superior writers we studied, this kind of revision for school writing is most typical of those students who practice writing on their own outside of school.

General Writing. The students in General Writing, our average freshmen, are familiar with about the same number of strategies as the AGW2 students, but their use of them and the values they associate with them are much more limited. These writers pause, plan, and consider revision more often than any other group. But although about half of them say that they usually make a lot of revisions, the revisions that they do make, like those of the freshman writers Nancy Sommers studies,⁶ seem limited to the level of the sentence or below: changing words and phrases; substituting more impressive vocabulary words; occasionally rearranging sentence order. Fewer than half say that they usually write more than one draft, and of all the writers we studied, these are the ones least inclined to stop a draft and start over, to add or cut substantial amounts, or to reformulate what they have written.

We would speculate that the relationship between revision and the

⁴Donald Murray, "Internal Revision: A Process of Discovery," in *Research on Composing: Points of Departure*, ed. Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1978), pp. 85-103.

⁵Richard Beach, "Self-Evaluation Strategies of Extensive Revisers and Non-Revisers," *College Composition and Communication*, 27 (May, 1976), 160-164.

⁶Nancy I. Sommers, "Revision in the Composing Process: A Case Study of College Freshmen and Experienced Adult Writers." Unpublished dissertation, Boston University, 1978, pp. 84-90.

kinds of assignments these students have been given gives rise to this rather limited writing process. Although about half of them said that they were thinking of expressive discourse when they were taking the survey and about half said they were thinking of explanatory discourse, we think that what these writers know and value about revision has probably been more heavily shaped by their experiences with explanatory discourse. For those responding to the essay question, “Describe the writing you feel you have revised the best,” 55.5 percent named some sort of explanatory task. Of these tasks, 68 percent were term papers—which is not surprising. But we also found that conventional expectations about explanatory writing dominated the general writers’ responses on the section of the survey dealing with the values associated with revision. The writers in this group were not much concerned with “internal” revision, nor did they give the highest responses to the value of developing an authentic *persona* (“revision is valuable in order to make my sentences seem more like my own way of saying things”). But they were far above any other group in the values they attached to revision in order to bring out the central ideas of a paper, to reorganize main points, to add supporting examples, and to change statements the reader might not understand.

Advanced General Writing: 1. The freshmen in Advanced General Writing were students who had scored only “average” on the placement essay but who had elected to take Advanced General Writing anyway. Their records showed that they had been superior English students in high school, and their instructor felt that their ability was sufficient for this advanced section. Yet, when we look at their responses to the survey, we find that these students are not younger versions of the older AGW students we discussed earlier but, rather, somewhat maturer versions of our general writers. That is, like the general writers they write one or two but rarely more than two drafts, pause frequently to reread and plan, and give a lot of attention to sentence style. If they are to be distinguished from the average writers, it is more in the direction of carefulness and planning than toward the older writers’ willingness to write a lot and take risks. These writers like to outline or make extensive notes and to pause frequently while writing. But they rarely revise, rearrange sentences or sections, stop and start over, or make extensive changes in what they write. They are concerned with eliminating redundancy and with responding to the questions of someone who has read the paper, but they seem to care little for personal style or for internal revision or reformulation. These characteristics may be due to their relative

familiarity with in-class essays and with persuasive discourse. But we suspect even more that their writing processes may have developed by way of successful imitation of a certain model derived not from the work of experienced writers but from some of the popular rhetorical textbooks which picture writing as a matter of trying to get everything right on the first try.

Basic Writing. In a similar sort of way, the students in Basic Writing, our second group, might be described as less successful versions of our average writers. The basic writers spend time on papers, think before beginning to write, pause, read, plan and revise while writing, edit for error, rearrange sentences, and cut out redundancy. But as a group, they say they do all of these things less often than the general writers. Some of their responses hint at the difficulties they have with the writing process. For example, they report a greater number of second drafts and more reformulation than the general writers. But since they are also the group which cares the least about the value of adding new ideas after rereading what they have written and the group which cares the most about revision as a chance to try a new approach when the first one does not work out, their values suggest that whatever rewriting they do is less a matter of “re-seeing” than it is a second chance after a failed effort.

We were also struck by the negative attitudes these basic writers expressed in the essays which asked about teachers who had helped them learn revision, about self-sponsored writing, and about papers they felt they had revised the best. For all three essays, the basic writers had the largest percentages of negative responses: “none,” “don’t know,” or no answer. Quite a few actually sounded hostile: “No teacher ever helped me with revision!” or, “I don’t waste my time with that.”

Some of these responses become understandable in light of these students’ high school experiences. The basic writers have done less writing than the students in the other groups, and they have done few writing tasks often enough to be really familiar with them. Of all groups studied, including Basic Reading and Writing, the basic writers have had the least amount of experience with class discussion of revision and with examples of revised work, either from professional or from student writing. They have had more responses from teachers about their papers than the students in Basic Reading and Writing, but these responses were mainly to first drafts. This left them on their own to cope with revising their completed papers, something they were required to do often in order to pull up an unsatisfactory grade. In light of the picture of the group that

emerges from our data, we would suggest that part of what is “basic” here is a problem of motivation. The sense of difficulty these writers experience and the association of revision with punishment work are issues which probably need as much attention from a teacher as strategies and skills.

Basic Reading and Writing. By contrast, the students in Basic Reading and Writing, those who were considered to have the lowest level of writing ability, seem to like to write. In this group, 44.7 percent have done some sort of self-sponsored writing other than letters, a figure not far from the general writers’ 50 percent. There are also some features of their writing processes that might be called sophisticated, for example, a willingness to add substantial amounts to what they have written and to write more than one draft of a paper. Their values are sometimes comparable to those of the older students in Advanced General Writing, especially their responses to items suggesting that revision is very valuable in order to explore further the feelings, ideas, or opinions expressed in a previous draft of a paper (BRW 42.6%, AGW2 45.5%) and to add new ideas which occur to the writer while rereading what has been written (BRW 68.1%, AGW2 63.6%). In this group, 55.6 percent say that revision is very valuable in order to create an individual, authentic *persona*, the highest “very valuable” response of all the groups we studied. Their responses on the two essay questions about teachers who have helped with revision and about papers they had revised the best were also as positive as those of the upperclassmen. They had taken about as many high school English courses involving writing instruction as the two groups in Advanced General Writing, and of all the groups in the survey this was the one with the most experience with student-teacher conferences and with peer-group paper reading.

If there is any likely reason why their level of writing ability is so inadequate for college, it is probably their lack of familiarity with anything other than expressive writing combined with a striking naivete about the demands of academic discourse. These writers only sometimes think a long time before beginning to write, and they rarely make any written plans or notes, preferring to begin a paper by “just beginning.” Fewer than half say they usually pause to plan while writing, and on the whole they pause less often than writers in the other groups to read and to consider revision. They also make fewer changes in words and phrases, and since this is the most popular form of revision other than editing among all the other freshmen we studied, their lack of interest in this kind

of stylistic change probably accounts in part for the relatively lower percentage of those in this group who say that they usually make a lot of changes in what they write.

Based on our findings, then, we think it is important to reiterate what Mina Shaughnessy has said about basic writers' lack of a sense of the expectations of an academic audience.⁷ Only 29.8 percent of these Basic Reading and Writing students say that revision is very valuable in order to change statements that the reader might not understand; by contrast, 71.3 percent of the general writers say that this is very valuable. Whereas 85.2 percent of the general writers find revision very valuable in order to cut out redundant statements, only 44.7 percent of the BRW writers agree. And whereas 88.8 percent of the general writers consider it very valuable to edit a paper for error, only 63.8 percent of these Basic Reading and Writing students seem to think that this is very important. The challenge, then, for any teacher who has these students in college is to ensure that they become familiar with the conventions and the audience demands of explanatory and persuasive academic discourse without, in the process, destroying all the positive attitudes and writing behaviors that these students have derived from their past experiences, and without implying that expressive and literary modes of discourse are in any way inferior to the others.

CONCLUSIONS

None of the students we surveyed are non-writers. Although certainly their levels of writing ability vary, they all do write, and most are acquainted with many strategies for writing and revising even if they do not always use them to their best advantage. Approximately half of them say that they have done at least some self-sponsored writing other than letters.

But even the better writers among the entering freshmen have rarely written papers involving more than one or two writing sessions, papers with any real audience other than the teacher, or papers which had specific connections with anything they had written previously or would write after that. For the freshman writers we surveyed, the higher their level of placement, the more their writing processes and values are adapted to one very narrow, specialized kind of writing—the short, impromptu explanatory essay. So it is difficult for us to imagine these

⁷Mina Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

writers functioning well in the “universe of discourse”⁸ inhabited by many college-educated adults, where writing tasks often involve long-term commitment, collaboration, reworking, and transformation of forms. Many university graduates work on projects requiring writing that takes months, even years. Written work in many disciplines is collaborative, even co-authored, which generally increases the need for revision. It may be submitted to an editor or supervisor and then reworked, often more than once. Form, style, and content undergo transformations as the purpose of writing shifts, as when, for example, a letter to a colleague becomes a series of lecture notes which then become a journal article which ultimately becomes the basis for a chapter in a book. If these long-term commitments to writing are to be recognized by students let alone adequately addressed by teachers, writing courses need to be concerned with sequenced assignments, a variety of discourse tasks, real audiences, and a lot of talk about writers writing. If revision is not taught within these contexts, then it may be reduced to nothing more than a set of textbook rules.

More to the immediate point, our freshman writers seem ill-prepared for the expectations of any college course in which open-mindedness, originality of thought, and the constant questioning of one’s own assumptions are highly valued. Few of these writers seem interested in “internal” revision. Those who say that they make extensive changes in what they write are working by and large at the level of work and phrase or editing for error. And this lack of what Nancy Sommers refers to as “holistic” concerns⁹ is also reflected in the fact that fewer than 25 percent see any reformulation in their papers even sometimes.

A teacher addressing these issues might, then, want to treat them in part as a question of attitudes and values: why might a writer want to “re-see” what has been said? In addition there is a way in which the group of older student writers we studied might serve as models for teaching the revising process at the freshman level. These upperclass writers represent a kind of intermediate level between entering freshmen and adult college graduates. In many ways they are like their younger counterparts. But what distinguishes them is their work with chunks of prose, rather than sentences or whole drafts. We strongly suspect that their ability to generate, delete, and move around whole sections of their papers is an

⁸James Moffett, *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968).

⁹Nancy Sommers. “Revision in the Composing Process.” pp. 87-88.

important reason why these writers feel free enough and confident enough to take bigger risks with their writing. In other words, they can focus on larger units of meaning and build on what has been said without having to abandon a whole draft and start over from scratch. We do not mean to suggest that these writers never get confused. But their combination of sophistication and flexibility may enable them to be, as a friend once said about his own research, confused on a higher level and about more important things.