# 11

# Poetry as No Big Deal

I remember Jeremy, a little English boy whose mother had to tell him that his music lessons were ending. His music teacher had decided he wasn't musical. He looked crestfallen and said to his mother, "But I *feel* musical."

Many people *feel* poetic. Capable of poetry. Sometimes they feel that way even though they have no particular idea or image or feeling they want to write about. Just a feeling that they would like to write a poem and that they could write a good one. It's a feeling that inhabits the midparts of the body anywhere between the gut and the breast.

Most of us* sadly learn to put those feelings away. They lead only to disappointment. We search for what to write a poem *about*, and either we don't come up with anything or, worse yet, we do—in which case we produce a piece of writing that is poetic in all the worst senses of the word: sticky, mawkish, embarrassing.

But it turns out that this is the worst possible approach to writing poetry—searching for what to write a poem about—particularly if we are inexperienced. It turns out that there is a completely different approach, and that is to ignore almost entirely the whole question of what to write about. Assume simply (and correctly) that you have plenty to write poems about and that your job is to keep

*I write here as a non-poet, that is, someone who enjoyed trying to write profound poems as an adolescent, got over it when introduced to sophistication, and then restricted himself to writing a birthday poem to a loved one about every seven years. But in the last couple of years I have enjoyed writing poems much more frequently in the fashion described in this chapter.

from mucking it up by paying too much attention to it. (Not that you ignore what's *in* the poem, only what the poem's *about*.) Somehow you have to let it emerge by itself so it isn't too falsely poetic or fake or manipulated. You need to keep your mind on what I suspect many poets have their minds on: the formal problem of the poem.

Robert Frost said that writing poetry without rhyme is like playing tennis without a net. And that having to rhyme helped him think of words and even ideas. Try writing a poem by keeping your mind only on the net and how to hit the ball over it. Consider the writing of a poem as the playing of a game, getting the ball through a hoop, a technical problem to be solved. It may seem very unpoetic but it leads to better luck with poems.

What you need for writing poems then is some interesting games to play, that is, some interesting rules you must obey. Allen Tate once described a poet as someone "willing to come under the bondage of limitations—if he can find them." In this chapter I will suggest a whole variety of mostly simple games, rules, or limitations. Gradually you can make up your own.

"The meter must be regular and the lines must rhyme" is the first rule that comes to mind when we think of poetry, but for various reasons it's not a good rule to use for a long time. It leads most of us to stilted language and inauthentic feeling—greeting-card poems. Most other rules, however, will have the opposite effect.

A good rule to start with is an easy one: "Write a long string of lines without stopping, and begin each one with 'I wish.' "* This rule for generating words is a good way to warm up. It permits you to write without stopping; indeed, that initial phrase is a kind of syntactic trampoline. It makes each sentence start itself with a bit of momentum so that more words just arrive without having to be sought. It helps you stand out of the way. This rule is also good to start with because it doesn't call for poems that are necessarily unified or organized—just strings of lines, some of which will have

*Homage to Kenneth Koch. Much of what I present here is derived from his books: *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children To Write Poetry* (New York, 1970); *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red: Teaching Great Poetry to Children* (New York, 1974); *I Never Told Anybody . . . : Teaching Poetry in a Nursing Home* (New York, 1977). Readers particularly interested in this chapter should consult Koch's books.

genuine merit, many of which will give pleasure to you and even to readers or listeners.

In the first few pieces you write (and the first one or two of any particular writing session) don't try for good lines, just try to keep on writing, as in freewriting, and see what comes. Loosen up. Repetition, nonsense, even cliché, or deadness is fine, just as long as you keep on writing. The process will usually lead you to some good poem-ingredients, and even if it doesn't, it warms you up. I wrote the following at the start of a writing session.

I wish it were April Fool's Day but it's Sadie Hawkins Day.
I wish I were done with this quarter and my book.
I wish my father wouldn't die.
I wish I were with him now.
I wish I wish I wish.
I wish things would happen.
I wish—do I wish anything? Maybe everything is fine.
I wish I didn't itch, but my life is built on itching.
I wish I didn't itch, but my life is built on itching.
I wish it were April 15.
I wish—I don't like writing I wish—it reinforces my habit of
conditionalizing the moment. I refuse, therefore, to write
I wish. There. See. I won't do it any more.
"I wish." Stop. Shut up. No more.
"I wish." Enough I won't hear any more.
"I wish." If you don't stop saying
I wish, I'll scream.

I had trouble getting started—I think I didn't really want to write—but by gradually accepting and writing about my resistance I drifted into playing with the rule itself. That play produced some verbal energy and pleasure for me and finally a sense of closure. It served to warm me up. After writing it I wanted to go on and write more.

Another one-line rule is to begin each line with "Once." What follows is a more unified piece.

Once Ma had a cookie jar shaped like a peach, only
once I thought it was an apple cause
once I said, Hey why a yellow apple and
once I had said it Ma said No.

Once you look at it for 10 years,
once you grow accustomed to it, at
once it begins to resemble a peach until you think how strange
once to have thought it was an apple.

SUZANNE RESS

The following piece represents someone using the rule "Begin each line with *now*." The rule served to give some concentration and order to a frightening time:

Now in the paling of her face,
now I can see there's a sickness there that hurts her.
Now, and still later. . . .
Now she cries out,
now calm, I worry, bringing water and smiles,
now forgetting how, cause
now she sweats so seriously I'm scared.
Now she sleeps, silent,
now, moaning, crying, calling out.
Now sweet and still, we seek distraction in Gorky,
or Pasternak or Cummings or. . . .
Now she twists her face into an alien design of pain and
Now I pray.

KIM KAUFMAN

There are innumerable ways of starting lines to give yourself a recurring pulse of syntactic energy. Begin each line with "yes," or "no," or "and," or with the name of someone you know. But remember you aren't trying for shaped complete poems, just warm-ups and perhaps some good ingredients. For a good way to search out memories from the past (and to give them some concentration and keep them from being too stilted in language), begin each line with "I remember."*

*You can use this structural principle not only for generating poem-ingredients, but also for generating ideas or perceptions or memories for any piece of writing. It aids invention. If you have to write about someone, try freewriting where you begin each sentence with the person's first name and you address your words *to* her and you don't permit yourself to stop writing no matter what words come out. Or begin each sentence with "I remember. . . ." You can use the same technique for writing reports about an organization, project, or period of time. You may get better ideas more quickly this way than by any other method. Some sentences get long—even develop into short paragraphs. But don't forget to keep coming back to beginning

Koch suggests two-line sequences, too:

Once . . . ,
Now. . . .

Or "I seem . . . ,/but really . . . ," "If . . . ,/then . . . ," Question/Statement, "Morning . . ./Noon . . ./Night . . ." "8 o'clock . . ./9 o'clock . . ./10 o'clock . . ." and so forth.

Koch suggests some one-line formulas that are nearly as easy and useful for warming up, but which don't provide you with the opening word and hence don't have that repetition. For example, make each line a lie.

I feel great.
The sun shines on beautiful tanned bodies.
Time is honey slow and people smile inwardly and love their government.
The dogs run free and so do we.
I hate this course, it produces nothing.
But I like to be lazy and vegetate.
I'm never attracted to people, women or men.
They never like me either, too bad.
Fluorescent lights are great, they make you look so healthy.
Boats are really boring, they make me groan and weak.

SIMON ANSELL

It was just a warm up but it yielded the following:

The sun shines on beautiful tanned bodies.
Time is honey slow and people
Smile inwardly and love their government.
The dogs run free.

Other formulas: each line must mention a color; a word in Spanish; a part of the body.

What seems important to me about this sort of initial easy rule for writing strings of poem-ingredients is not just that they warm you up, but that they warm you up in a particular way. They help

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new sentences with the germ formula. Keep using this syntactic pump till your source is dry. This continual looking your subject in the eye and addressing your words *to* it—or this recurrent "I remember" which drags your mind back to events without giving you a chance to think analytically—these gimmicks somehow force you to blurt out what is important.

you generate words you didn't plan, words that surprise you or come from a part of you not easily available. They help you stand out of the way. Once you are warmed up, you can keep that capacity, that openness to the unexpected, and go on to write things more like poems: writing where you allow yourself some time for deliberation and reflection and second thoughts as you write.

But as you go on to attempt more shaped pieces in a more deliberate way, be sure to keep the two crucial elements in the process: have a rule you must obey and don't dawdle.

Having a rule doesn't just give you a technical problem to occupy your attention, it also takes a tiny element of authority off your shoulders. "I can't think of anything to write a poem about. But if *she* is going to make me write a haiku* about breakfast, I guess I can work something out. It may not be any good, but it was her idea not mine." The trick is that *you* can be that *she*—that person who says, "Hmmm, let's see, haiku: breakfast." Not because you have any preference or need for a haiku or any particular memory or feeling in mind about breakfast. It's probably best if you don't. (You can even give all responsibility to chance by putting rules on cards and shuffling them.)

And don't dawdle. Some reflection, yes, second or third thoughts now and then as you go along—this isn't freewriting as in "I wish"—but don't let fifteen or twenty minutes go by without at least a short poem to show for your efforts. You simply have to force yourself to accept some unsatisfactory sections, some unsatisfactory whole poems and just say what the hell. It's only raw writing after all. You can revise later or simply throw it away. You'll have lots of poems to choose from.

You can use a phrase to generate stanzas, not just single lines. Rule: write a poem about childhood (about your father, mother, favorite car, whatever) of three rough stanzas, each one beginning with "I remember." Even though you are not setting up a rhyme scheme or metrical demands, the formal repetition of "I remember" and the fact that you are calling this a poem helps you give your words the concentration characteristic of poetry.

*Haiku, a traditional Japanese form in which you are restricted to seventeen syllables. Purists say the lines should go 5, 7, 5. For example:

Small bare feet, cold floor.
"Me want a breakable bowl."
Waddler in diapers.

But you can give more concentration by tightening the rule a bit: start three four-line stanzas with "I remember." Get some form of the word remember (for example, memory, remembering) in each fourth line. Repeat some word or phrase in lines one and two or in lines two and three.

Write a short poem about an object you can see that begins "The (object) (verb). . . ." Within a line or two say "It makes me. . . ." Somewhere include a question.

> The electric outlet flashes, it sizzles, and
> Peering into the socket I see a tunnel,
> Irridescent blue sparks flying back through the inside of time.
> It makes me wonder how far my hate really goes.
> To the wire? the station? the turbine? the water?
> The dam? the rain? the sun? the night? the doorway?
> The fire? the iron? the harp? the weaver?
> The pasture? the challenge? the whisper? the word?
> The silence-singing crystalline air dissolves
> And there is no more.*
>
> WILLIAM L. MCNAUGHTEN

This formula could be expanded: describe a room or a place by writing three stanzas which follow the preceding rules. However, the last stanza should not have a question.

A favorite of mine is to insist that the poem start off with a short bit of actual speech, unfinished perhaps. Spoken words seem to inject life.

> "But on the other . . ."
> He paused,
> Looking down at his right hand,

*A note about revising. Sometimes it's hard to resist over-clarifying or over-stating your meaning when you revise. Or at least that's what I feel McNaughten did when he revised as follows:

> The wall outlet flashes and sizzles threateningly before me. Peering into the socket I see a tunnel, irridescent blue sparks flying backwards through time.
> . . . It makes me wonder just how far my hate really goes. . . .
> to the wire? station? turbine? dam?
> to the river? rain? sun? sea?
> Straining, I see stellar fragments; cosmic clash,
> then, only silence.

I believe he could enhance the strength of his original by making no changes at all in wording and only cutting some items from the end of his long list. If you can cut away what isn't needed, but leave the best original words with juice, that is often the best way to revise.

his hand with all five fingers curled to a point
around the little chalk-end
which pointed toward his face;
his hand that he didn't even see because his eyes were glazed over;
his hand that was the word he forgot to say.

One student nervously looked around with her eyes,
holding her head absolutely stationary.
She'd never been to his class before.
The others, scattered round the windowless room
listened appreciatively to the air conditioning
and gave themselves up to the
pleasure of smelling chalk dust.

PETER ELBOW

I made myself the rule without any phrase in mind. "But on the other [hand]" was simply the first thing I thought of after I decided on the rule, and being stuck with that I *had* to proceed and simply see what came next. Being boxed in and having to work from there—and write *something*—had the effect of dredging an image from me that was totally unplanned (and unremembered as far as I could tell). The process helped me to invent in a way I seldom can. It was such a pleasure not feeling the poem has to be about anything, just to fulfill a rule and sort of go along till it seems to end itself. I didn't force my pen to keep moving at all times but if a pause or stuckness lasted a whole minute or two I forced myself to put down something—like forcing myself to settle for "it" in Scrabble when my time runs out. I edited the results right afterwards, in a couple of minutes, leaving out a couple of lines and a handful of words and phrases.

Write a short poem that begins with a swear word.

Dammit!
You're always complaining,
Bitching at me.
Nothing I ever did was right.
But that's just too bad.
You're dead now.
So leave me alone.

KAREN GREENE

Write a poem that begins with pronouncing a curse or spell on someone.

A form that I know from Richard Hugo's use of it: make a poem by writing it as a real letter to a real person. Here is Karen Greene again:

Dear Sharon

I've been trying to find the time
To write to you.
I got your last letter
such a long time ago.

Elizabeth can crawl now.
When she smiles
There are two teeth.

Michael's O.K.
We don't live together
any more.
I don't love him.

I have a one bedroom apartment,
upstairs with a balcony,
green shag on the floor.

KAREN GREENE

A favorite germ for me involves using (instead of just fighting) the demon who tries to stop you from writing. This time I said make the demon talk to you.

Whitney,
You know the sound of that typewriter
only gets me horny.

Listen,
Such an Om . . .
Click, click, click.
Godamn inhuman machinery.
You know, Whitney,
If you were out in the sunshine
then a sunny metaphor would
inform and transform
this page.
It would not so reek
of metal and electricity.

Turn off the typewriter, Whitney.
Ouch, your ears.
Why, art cannot come from such pain
transforming and deforming
Deflowering and overpowering.

Can't you see that it's feeding me, Whitney?
It's making me stronger.

WHITNEY BLAUVELT

Sometimes the very structural principle that you used to generate the poem in the first place can be omitted when you are done. Paula Aldrich found she could take down the scaffolding ("begin each line with the name of a person you care about") and end up with a structure that stood better by itself.

Dad, you're gone.
Dad, you're dead. Cremated.
Dad, I miss you.
Dad, I cry when I miss you.
Dad, *why* do I have to cry?
Dad, why must I feel alone without you?
Dad, why did you have to die?
Dad, it's been two years, why can't I adjust.
Dad, it's spring coming.
Dad, it's planting time.
Dad, the snow is melting.
Dad, fields are waiting for your tractor—for your hand in sowing the crops.
Dad, is it spring where you are?
Dad, are you planting there?

. . .

Dad, you're gone.
You're dead. Cremated.
I cry when I miss you.
It's been two years, why can't I adjust?
It's planting time,
the snow is melting.
Fields are waiting for your tractor,
for your hand in sowing the crops.
Dad, are you planting there?

PAULA ALDRICH

Poets have traditionally built on elements or structural principles they found in other poems. Kenneth Koch read Blake's "Tyger, Tyger," and asked children to write a poem in which they spoke to an animal.* We were reading *Hamlet* in a class and, almost as a lark, I made the rule "Begin a poem with a phrase and a negation of it (as in 'to be or not to be')." I ended up with this.

*Hamlet at the Beach*

Going in or coming out.
That's all they seem to do.
Water drips off them as they come out.
The women pull up their stupid tops.
The men glance down at their crotches, pretending not to look.
They shake their head and make little drips fly out in all directions.
Some bang their heads against their stationary hands.
The idiots.
Going in they are either sleep walkers or crazy mechanical dolls.
And greasy from the oil.
A problem in geometry: where would the sun have to be so that I see not one gleam from a perfectly oiled body?
Behind a cloud. Behind the earth.
Up their ass.

Going in or coming out.
Let them do it.
Why should I care.
They do nothing once in. They do nothing once out.
They only need to change.
They need me to look at them.
We all have our job.

Again the central element in the process was forcing myself to *take* the first or second phrase-and-negation that came to me in response to the arbitrary rule ("going in or coming out"—along with an image of swimmers on a hot beach). And then forcing myself to

* In *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red: Teaching Great Poetry to Children* (New York, 1974), he stresses how the procedure can be seen as a way to read existing poems, not just write new ones.

proceed from there even though I had no plan. The title came afterwards. What feels to me important about the process is the way it helps me stand out of the way and still concentrate my attention.

Write a poem that looks at or talks about the same thing over and over again as in Wallace Stevens's "13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." I wrote:

> Before we moved
> I broke the rotten section off
> the cherry tree behind the house on Percival Street
> even though there were still some blossoms on it.
>
> When we used to look out our bedroom window
> we saw the cherry tree.
>
> The cherry tree helped
> when I had need of looking out the bedroom window.
>
> The cherry tree did not take sides
> in our arguments.
>
> To smell a blossom I had to stand so close
> that I couldn't focus on it. Simple justice.
>
> Decisions, decisions: every cherry has to come
> either alone or in pairs or trios.
>
> Is every leaf really the same?
> It depends what you mean by the same.
>
> Let us suppose that for every cherry there is a bird.
> Would that make life simple?
> Would we get no pie?

I see now that it is about missing the house on Percival Street where we used to live. Perhaps it needs a final stanza to put things back in the past tense, and it would point up the theme a bit more. But there lies the danger. If I had tried to write a poem about missing that house, it probably would have been terrible. Being stuck with having to write tiny stanzas about the cherry tree did it for me.

But of course there is a price to pay. It wouldn't be a bad poem (by some sort of kindly amateur standard) if it wasn't so obviously an imitation. But if I'm willing to pay that price, I get in return the ability to write something better than I could write without help.

Long before Kenneth Koch started using simple rules with chil-

dren and others inexperienced in writing poetry, Theodore Roethke was using complex rules with serious poetry students.

> Roethke's solution to this problem involved, in part, using a number of exercises in form, exercises so monstrously arbitrary and not of the student's choosing that the arguments against false emotion or the dreads of vanity can hardly appear. Richard Hugo describes one such exercise in "Stray Thoughts on Roethke and Teaching" (*American Poetry Review*, 3, No. 1, 1974):

| *Nouns* | *Verbs* | *Adjectives* |
|---|---|---|
| tamarack | to kiss | blue |
| throat | to curve | hot |
| belief | to swing | soft |
| rock | to ruin | tough |
| dog | to bite | important |
| frog | to cut | wavering |
| slag | to surprise | sharp |
| eye | to bruise | cool |
| cloud | to hug | red |
| mud | to say | leather |

> Use five nouns, verbs, and adjectives from the above lists and write a poem as follows:
>
> 1. Four beats to the line (can vary).
> 2. Six lines to the stanza.
> 3. Three stanzas.
> 4. At least two internal and one external slant rhyme per stanza. (Full rhymes acceptable but not encouraged).
> 5. Maximum of two end stops per stanza.
> 6. Clear English grammatical sentences. (No tricks.) All sentences must make sense.

After reading Hugo's piece, I tried the exercise with a class and found that, if I presented it as a game, students were willing to play. What could they lose? It wasn't their poem, but a game at which one can only win. The exercise is marvelous in its resource of always giving back to the students a little more than they put in. Gifted students, apparently, will turn the exercise into their own piece, for the poems below are remarkably individual. The less gifted, at least learn, *firsthand*, important things about diction, rhyme, and rhythm. As Roethke says, "even to 'hear' a good poem carries us far beyond the ordinary in education. And to write a verse, or even a piece of verse, however awkward and crude, that bears some mark, something characteristic of the author's true nature—that is . . . a considerable human achievement."

*Pliny at Stabiae*

South of Pompeii the helmsman balked,
refused to go further. He cursed his gods
and watched the flame column burst up
curve, branch like a pine. Waves pitched
our sloop while molten lava swallowed
whole vineyards on the eastern slope.

Mud slaked down from a dense blue cloud.
In the wavering hot air, dogs howled
in fear. Sharp rocks and pumice pieces
were raining, bruising men who ran
for shelter through the rubbled streets,
hugging pillows over their heads.

At length came a sort of calm. Ash fell
thick and silent as snow. I asked for
water to cool my burning throat,
and slept a bit. When I awoke
I found the others were gone. The sun
Swung wildly in the red streaked sky.

MARGARET WHALEY

[Two other poems are omitted here.]

Since using the exercise I have developed others which also encourage students to tinker and to remake and which free students from the usual personal obstacles. I ask them, for instance, to translate a poem from a foreign language and to explain what was lost or gained in the process; I give them a handful of poems which I have rewritten as prose and I ask them to restore them as verse (including, usually, William Carlos Williams at his prosiest, and a ringer: a piece of prose that scans and perhaps rhymes, as do some sections of Vladimir Nabokov's short story, "First Love"). Sometimes we take a handbook such as Lewis Turco's *Book of Forms* and use it like the *I Ching* or the *sortes Virgilianae*. . . . Close your eyes, flip the pages; whatever form your finger stops on is your momentary fate: a rondelet, a Welsh cyhydedd, etc.*

Translating poems is another way to give yourself constraints—nets to hit the ball over. You can even translate from a language you don't know if you find a version with a literal translation in-

*From the article "South of Pompeii the Helmsman Balked," by John Balaban, *College English*, vol. 39, no. 4, December, 1977.

cluded. (Best if you can hear it out loud in the original. Much poetry is recorded. The Penguin books of poetry in foreign languages have literal translations of each poem at the bottom of the page.) Or take an old poem and make it new. Or simply take a poem and twist it somehow. "Amateurs borrow, professionals steal," said T. S. Eliot. I have been trying to illustrate in this chapter how amateurs can write pleasing poetry in an amateur spirit, but now I want to illustrate that even a serious professional poet writing a serious poem can still attain this spirit of somehow not making too big a deal out of poetry:

*Psalm 81* *

All all come before you
Big wigs and small
The down and out
The up and coming
The boisterous the preposterous
Left fielders right wingers
The motley the mortified
Flag wavers free loaders

What a procession!

Every one cut down
The scythe ranging wide and far
(those bony implacable arms
Those harvester's hands!)

Like the newborn fawn's
Legs sheared off in the long grass

Bundled in
Guts and spring wheat
Eyes
Half opened in birth
Half closed
In death

Harvest and planting
The hunter
Stuffs his sack and strides on

Have mercy on us
Have mercy

DANIEL BERRIGAN, translator

*Printed in *The Catholic Worker*, January, 1980.

Many of the poems I've quoted were written in a class or a group. Often I, as teacher, suggested the rule to obey. In a certain sense that was an aid to the others: my authority took some of the onus off them and helped get them going. I didn't have any special authority over myself of course, yet a willingness to follow my own rule was usually extremely helpful to me, too. If you have a small group of people who want to try this approach, it is fun to share the responsibility for setting the rules. Five people could each bring one rule for an evening's writing.

However you arrange it, other people somehow help. Their presence writing with you, the fact that you have to get on with it and write *something* even if it is terrible, and the chance to read some of your pieces out loud and hear what the others have written: these things usually help you get words down on paper, energize you, and focus your attention. Particularly if you are inexperienced. Writing in a group can get you going and later you can use the same approach on your own.

Writing group-poems can be a good way of pooling imagination. There's the familiar party-game approach where each person writes just one line. (You can have each person write knowing all the previous lines, or else have each person know only the preceding line, or else play with everyone blind to *all* other lines.) These games often provide a kind of loosening up, randomness, even hilarity. They usually increase everyone's verbal and imagistic resources. More substantial than pooling single lines, however, is something like a group childhood poem: each person writes a short stanza beginning with "I remember." You may or may not want other restraints (for example, each person is assigned a toy, implement, room of the house, time of day, whatever). There are many ways to build a shaped group poem. We were reading Shakespeare and seven of us decided to write "The Seven Ages of Woman."

*Infant*

Having moved from womb to breast
the lack of warmth bewilders me.
No longer am I safe and protected.
So much awaits me I have yet to comprehend.
Fists clenched, legs kicking
helpless, I cry
without thought.

Only feelings and instinct
tell me I am hungry and alone.

*Schoolgirl*

I chased Bobby today.
He ran. Ran from my cooties.
Boys are stupid sometimes.
I stopped when I got tired
laughing at the springtime air.
Laughing at Bobby glancing behind himself nervously.
Boys are stupid most all the time.

*Lover*

Fire flames reflecting colors off of your back,
rippling light as you move into a curling wave
of our self-created moisture.
I let you touch me and feel our rhythms
beat within the movement
leaping into blues and greens
coloring me from moves within your wave.

*Housewife*

Musky smells penetrate the night air.
Paper shuffles, cans collide like
a waterfall. Sounds carry to
depths below with a thundering
crash.
The plastic trash can leaves an angry hand,
hitting pavement with a bound.
Next time he can do it for once.

*Mother*

My belly soft
from too many children
too often
too soon.
My eyes are tired.
I have seen—
And I have known—
The painful world
that my babies
Must learn to live in.

But
  I want to
  keep them safe from it.
I know
  that they think I
  don't know anything.
  That Mom
  is just an old-stick-in-the-mud.
But honestly,
  I just want to
  keep my babies
  safe with me.

*Grandma*

I dole out the treats
and receive my thanks
from their glowing eyes
and gooey grins.
The sticky fingers
will remain behind
for me to wipe away
with a contented sigh
tomorrow.

*Aged*

"Turn off that news!
Put it back to Hollywood Squares.
Just because you can still walk around
doesn't mean you get to choose the program."
I've been here longer than any of them.
People used to visit me too.
I've seen 'em peter out.
I'll see their honey-sweet relatives stop coming too.
"You won't be so smart alecky then!"
Oh no, the door bell.
My hair isn't ready.
I wonder if I'll let him muss it up
after the dance.
Oh mommy, I don't want to go to school today.
Please let me stay home and cook with you.
They're mean to me,
they pull my hair.
"Don't you touch that dial.

My eyes weren't closed.
I was just thinking."
PAM CORWIN, BRUCE CLIFTON, LAUREN PHILBRICK, BING BRISTOL, KAREN KLOCKE, GINA KANEVSKY, PETER ELBOW

In short, by not making too big a deal of poetry—letting it be play-within-rules, letting it be about what it turns out to be about—you can write poems which please but don't try too hard. You will sometimes get a poem that is terrific or could be made so. This is a bonus. And if you decide to cross over that dangerous line and start making a big deal out of poetry, you probably won't do it till you have learned to make up rules for yourself, to cut away what's weak and not feel stuck with your original scaffolding, to find authentic language by choice rather than just by accident, and most of all to develop an ear for when poetry is too pretentious.

# MORE WAYS TO REVISE

## INTRODUCTION

The creativity needed for getting good words on paper is available to everyone (though some people find it difficult to let themselves use it). But revising requires wisdom, judgment, and maturity. There is no way to get these qualities except through practice and experience. The most inexperienced writer can sometimes produce brilliantly but only scarred old pros revise brilliantly.

But I don't want to emphasize this dismal view too much. Yes, revising is the hardest task of all—most difficult and most unpleasant—but if you manage yourself right you won't have to revise until you have produced enough so there is plenty to throw away. Revising is only killing when you do it in a fruitless way—and an unfortunately common way: revising as you write and thus judging and correcting and trying to throw away every sentence while you are in the act of writing it; or trying to fix a pinched and scrawny draft that you know with a sinking heart has nothing solid in it.

As you improve your ability to put down words on paper—to put down more and worry less—you will find yourself naturally developing the critical consciousness that leads to good revising. Not just brute negativity: the ability to detach yourself from your own words so you can throw away what's bad or inappropriate. But also an imaginative critical-mindedness: the ability to look *through* your words as they are and see which parts *could* be good and see how the good parts *could* be shaped.

I have sometimes been accused of ignoring revision or denying

its importance or being uninterested in it. As a result I have watched myself for a number of years with a particular eye to revising. I have learned some interesting things. In spite of my fine preaching about the importance of free, unworried writing—and in spite of my progress in finally learning how to practice what I preach—I discovered that I spent far more time revising than I did producing. But I didn't *think* about revising. I just put my head down and did it. That's why I tended not to notice it and, more important, why I tended to do it inefficiently. But as I watched my revising behavior I began to realize that I didn't only have lots of practice at it, I also had a small spectrum of approaches that I could improve and then develop into a set of options —options that I could then learn to apply more consciously to different writing occasions.

I also reflected on the question of *why* I spend so much of my time revising. One reason, not surprisingly, is my temperament: I am a worrier and always think of how readers will object or disagree. This was the temperament that led to my being totally blocked and unable to write for a couple of years. But even after I got myself writing again I continued to devote enormous time to the revising process and this time it wasn't just because I was a worrier. The reason I finally got myself writing again was my belief that I had something important to say and my decision, in effect, to force the world to listen to me. I didn't just want to get things written for my own pleasure; I didn't just want to hand something in that would satisfy or even dazzle some examiner or judge; I wanted lots of people to believe what I was saying, to change their minds, and, damn it, to change their behavior.

I would suggest, then, that the most trustworthy motive for revising is the desire to make things work on readers. The spirit of worry had led me only to compulsive fiddling. I didn't get to productive revising till I insisted on being heard.

It's helpful to realize that there isn't just one way to revise. You have different needs depending upon the kind of writing you are engaged in, the circumstances, and your temperament. If you practice quick revising (Chapter 5) and the revising methods below, you will have a wide array of techniques at your command for a wide array of situations. I won't try to summarize or describe these chapters here because the titles are for the most part self-explanatory:

12. Thorough Revising
13. Revising with Feedback
14. Cut-and-Paste Revising and the Collage
15. The Last Step: Getting Rid of Mistakes in Grammar
16. Nausea

## Practice Revising on Other People's Writing

What makes revising hard is not so much the actual skills you must use. I will describe them in the following chapters. These skills are demanding, but we could learn them steadily and easily if we didn't have to learn them on our own writing. Surgeons don't learn cutting skills by turning the knife on themselves. It feels like cutting your own flesh to take your own writing apart, rearrange it, and throw away large chunks.

Use the knife on other people's writing and you will learn quicker not only the outward techniques of good revising, but also the essential inner reaction that will lead you to those techniques: an intolerance for something that doesn't work and a willingness to make changes even if it means discarding wonderful stuff. Once you get comfortable wielding the knife and seeing blood on the floor, it turns out to be easier to wield it on yourself.

It is easy to get together with a few others and practice revising by revising each other's drafts. In addition each writer will get three or four rewrites of his draft. This is good feedback—if sometimes painful: a re-drafting is a re-seeing of what you've written. What's really hard about revising is to believe that what you have written can undergo major cutting and changing and still say what you mean. When someone shows you how to say it more simply and in less space—whether by cutting and rearranging your words or by rewriting it afresh in his own words—it makes you more willing to practice cutting and recasting your own words.

But even if for some reason you don't want to work with others in this way, there is writing all around you that needs revising. Choose the kind of writing you want to work on. Revise articles, reports, or memos that come across your desk. Translate poems. Newspapers and magazines are full of writing that needs revision: stories, arguments, letters, essays, how-to-do-its. Most of it was written and revised in a rush. Because these things are set so neatly in print and don't for the most part have mistakes in spelling

and grammar, they often feel as though they *belong* just the way they are. It's hard to undress them in your mind and see how they could look—how they could be organized or conceptualized differently. But that's exactly the skill you need for revising. Your own writing is similarly hard to undress and reconceptualize—not because it's neatly printed without errors, but because it is yours.

If you revise published writing, you may fear you will make it worse rather than better. You probably won't, but even if you do, you get the essential practice of cutting, reconceiving, and reordering.

Revising someone else's words gives you an especially good opportunity to find out how words work on readers. Since beginnings are so crucial in determining whether a reader fights the words or goes along with them, it is especially useful to test different beginnings for the same piece: a quick overview for business-like perspective; an informal or even chatty statement directly to the reader; an anecdote that introduces the topic; an example that somehow symbolizes it.

Since it is easier to fool around with the writing of others, you can fairly quickly turn out alternate versions of an entire piece. Try different tones: chatty, authoritative, ironic. Try different ways of organizing: starting with the conclusion, building up to it last. Persuade with reasoning, with anecdote. Hide the weak arguments, admit them openly. Try to write it in half the length. Try different formats on the page such as lists or pictures or diagrams. Of course you can do the same thing with stories, essays, poems. You can make these controlled experiments with your own writing, too—and this practice will lead you to do so—but it's much easier to start with someone else's writing.

By the way, when you revise someone else's writing you are, in effect, collaborating. If you try it you will notice an interesting method for *collaborative writing*. Three people might proceed as follows: A writes a rough think-piece or discussion-piece (perhaps they had a preliminary discussion, but not necessarily, and they didn't have to try to agree with each other); everyone reads it and discusses the issues (not the quality of A's writing); B takes notes on the discussion and then writes his own fresh draft—not trying, however, to get everything right since things are still in process; everyone discusses B's draft in order to advance the group's thinking and to decide where the draft reflects their agreement and

where it doesn't; C takes notes and then writes a near-to-final draft; all give feedback and someone does final editing. This method is especially useful if the collaboration must be conducted by mail: everyone can mail their thoughts and reactions to the next writer.

This method usually achieves more genuine collaboration than other methods (where one person really does all the writing and gives his imprint to the piece; or where the authors each write one segment and the resulting piece lacks integration and smooth joints). Most important, it leads to the best sort of thinking-and-writing: new ideas emerge in mid-course that all agree on—that feel like "just what we wanted to say"—but that are original. The process may sound like much more work, but often it is not because it involves such unpressured writing. People churn out their drafts quickly and get good practice in writing because no draft has to be "just right" till it's obvious what "just right" is.

### No Revising

Learn when not to revise. It's because I take revising so seriously that I say this. For if you try to revise everything you write you will use up too much time that you could spend on new writing. After all, you can write thirteen new pages in the time it takes to revise three pages well. And you will get so duty-bound and bored about revising that you will begin to settle for a perfunctory job of it—instead of really re-seeing. Make sure, then, that you devote enough of your time to rough exploratory writing you don't revise, so you are sure to produce *some* writing that really pleases you. Your desire to get others to read it will ensure that you revise it. This will solve the biggest problem in revising: motivation and energy to do it enthusiastically.

Of course anything must be revised if you really want it to work for an audience, so what I am really saying here is to make sure you do other kinds of writing. Write for yourself: use freewriting, explore a train of thought, figure out a decision, write yourself out of a depression. You can even dash off pieces for certain audiences on certain occasions when you don't care how they react. You aren't giving them a finished product, you are just letting them look around in your messy studio at some of your work in progress. You'll discover you can produce all these kinds of unrevised writ-

ing almost as quickly as you have ideas. You will end up writing lots because it's not such a big production. (See Chapter 10 on the use of writing for other tasks.)

Best of all, write things you can throw away. For the central act in revising is throwing things away. All the subtler transforming and rearranging skills in revising depend upon a willingness to chop. For some reason people have found it easy to adopt a throw-away mentality with respect to the world's natural resources. "What the hell, there's plenty more where that came from." Yet there *isn't* plenty more where that came from. It's curious that people often find it difficult to learn a throw-away mentality with respect to our own mental resources. When it comes to words, ideas, feelings, and insights, there *is* plenty more where that came from. The more you use and throw away, the more you have available. You will find, then, that your ability to revise quickly and without too much pain will be tied to your ability to produce copiously and creatively.

Besides, if you always try for quality and always try to make your writing work for an audience, you inhibit certain kinds of growth and development in your writing. It would be as though you only played a musical instrument in performance—you never practiced or fooled around. When you always revise for an audience there is always pressure on you to be prudent. But for growth you need to take chances. Certain kinds of slow underground development won't happen unless you write in quantity and let yourself try out new approaches, new ideas, and wild experiments.

• • •

But there is another kind of no-revising. This is when you are writing along freely without worry—perhaps freewriting, perhaps writing a draft of something—and all of a sudden you find yourself writing it just right. You are saying exactly what you want to say, exactly the way you want to say it. You cooked it perfectly in your head. No need for revising at all.

It's hard to try to *make* this happen, but it will happen. Everyone is visited by the muse under certain conditions (excitement? sanctity? trust in self?). But even when it happens, you must still revise. That is, you must re-see, look again at your writing with your critical, doubting, revising consciousness to make sure it really is as good as you thought. For sometimes it seemed like divine

inspiration last night as you were writing, but now this morning you discover it was only hot air.

The fact remains, however: if you want to take revising seriously and make good use of the methods for revising that I describe in the following chapters—especially thorough revising and revising with feedback—you need to write plenty that you don't revise.

# 12

# Thorough Revising

Where the leverage in quick revising comes from stepping out of your skin and being someone else, the leverage in thorough revising comes from time. Not just work time, but putting-it-away-and-forgetting-about-it time. What you can accomplish in three hours of wrestling with your draft can be accomplished in one hour—and a much less frustrating hour, too—if you first set it aside for a day or two. Indeed, there are some improvements you can never achieve through wrestling alone, such as a fresh conception of your material. Often you can only find a new shape for your piece if you take a vacation—a time for forgetting, for preconscious work, for letting it get bumped out of shape by an experience from an entirely different part of your life. So make sure that at least on two occasions during the thorough revising process you put your writing aside long enough to forget about it—a couple of days or better yet a couple of weeks: once during the first half when you are hammering out and organizing the thing as a whole and once during the second half when you are cleaning up and polishing and paying more attention to details of language.

## Shaping Your Meaning

First step in thorough revising: if this piece is intended for an audience, *get your readers and purpose clearly in mind.* Just as with quick revising or any revising, you must now keep your audience and purpose clearly in mind, especially if you allowed yourself to ignore them while you were getting words on paper. There

is no such thing as good-writing-in-general. You must make it good for this purpose with this audience.

Next, *read over what you've written and mark the important bits* (just as in quick revising).

Next, *find your main point or center of gravity.* This is the same step as in quick revising, but this time you don't take No for an answer as you sometimes had to do when you were revising in a hurry. Sometimes, of course, you knew precisely what your main point or focus was even before you started writing: the whole reason for sitting down to write in the first place was to focus on exactly that one thing which you had already formulated in your head. (But don't hold too tenaciously to it. The process of writing will often lead you to better things.)

But if you haven't found your main point during the writing process, now you must demand it. This is often a crucial, delicate, frustrating process. You have lots of good stuff, but as you turn it over and over, you can't find the center, the main point, the one thing that sums it all up. You are trying to wrestle a powerful snake into a bottle. It writhes and writhes and you can't get control over it. You have two main options, putting it aside and wrestling some more.

Putting it aside for a couple of days is easiest and best. The main point will often come perfectly clear to you all by itself, as you are walking around doing something entirely different or else when you sit down again after your vacation. Your mind will chew on the problem by itself while you are supposedly ignoring it. But if that doesn't work, you'll just have to wrestle some more with that snake. Indeed, you probably get the most benefit from a vacation if you wrestle a bit first to get the problem fully permeated into your mind for your unconscious to work on it.

Here are the ways of wrestling that I have found most useful.

- Arrange the good bits in the order that makes most sense. That helps you see where they are coming from or trying to go.
- Think some more about who will read these words. You're not looking for some main point in general but the best emphasis for getting through to those readers.
- Summarize each of the good bits in one sentence (or in two or three sentences if there are two or three separate points in one passage). By making each point *assert* something in a full sentence with a verb, you clarify half-thought ideas. If you put

these sentences then into a logical order you will almost invariably find your main point.

• Do more raw writing. Abandon the detached consciousness of critical revising and plunge back into uncritical, involved writing. This new burst of unworried words, after you have been wrestling, helps you find that main idea.

• Last resort. If you still can't find the main point, make a "false" main point. Distort or oversimplify what you are saying and force as many of your points as possible into a slightly wrong focus that is easier to find than the right one you are seeking. Or adopt the opposite point of view and quickly make up an outline of assertions in support of it. Summing things up into this simpler or distorted or dead-wrong point of view will often produce the idea you have been looking for.

• And of course another vacation is always a good idea if wrestling doesn't go well.

Next, *put your parts in order on the basis of your main idea.* If the pieces don't fall easily into an obvious order you must make an outline that consists of full-sentence assertions: find each idea in your best bits of raw writing, force yourself to summarize it in a sentence that asserts something, then put those sentences into the order that tells the most coherent story. (Of course there are likely to be gaps you must fill in to make a coherent story.)

Next, *make a draft.* Using your outline as a blueprint, write out a rough draft of the whole thing. You may be able to use large chunks of your original writing. Scissors and a paste can carry you a long way (if you were smart enough to write on only one side of the paper). But often you must write lots out new.The goal, however, isn't perfect, clear, graceful language. I, at least, fare better if I just try to get my thoughts *said* and don't worry too much about awkwardness, repetition, roundaboutness—even imprecision—at this stage. There are all these decisions I must make as I write a draft: can I use this favorite word again here? does this distinction belong here or later? which of two similar words is the right one? These decisions are always easier to make *after* I have written out a draft of the whole thing. (The general principle here is to bring the whole piece along gradually: don't polish any particular section very much *more* than any other, since *final* decisions here always depend on final decisions there. It feels like keeping lots of balls in the air at once, but it's easier in the long run.)

*Possible detour: deal with a mess.* This is a stage in revising when you have to be ready for a mess. Perhaps just a minor mess. For example, as you write out sentences they tug against the structure you have carefully worked out. Perhaps you are writing out the third idea in your list of assertions, but it keeps grabbing the reins out of your hands and leading to the seventh assertion instead of the fourth one. Three-to-four seems so logical in an outline, but three-to-seven feels unavoidable as the words themselves flow into sentences. The question is whether the writing-out has led you to a better order or whether you should resist that tug and force the sentences to follow the original organization. To make up your mind you need perspective and taking a break is probably the best way to get it. Often, in fact, it doesn't much matter which way to go, but you need new perspective to see that clearly.

But sometimes it's a major mess, or at least it threatens to be one: not just a possible minor shifting of points but a major coming apart. Perhaps you have to change your mind about what you thought you were saying.

Here's how it's apt to happen. You know your main point and your organizing shape and you are writing out a draft, but now in mid-stride, as you are explaining some small detail or bringing in some small illustration you hadn't thought of before, suddenly that detail turns into a land mine and blows up your whole draft in your hands. You've stumbled onto a specific case that seems to deny or disprove your main idea. Or perhaps as you are arguing some point you try to think of what an opponent might say—as you should—and suddenly you think of an opposing argument that you cannot answer. This is the most discouraging moment in expository or conceptual writing. It helps to realize not only that this kind of thing is common in writing, but that, despite how you feel right now, something *good* just happened to you.

For this is how new and better ideas arrive. They don't come out of the blue. They come from noticing difficulties with what you believed, small details or particular cases that don't fit what otherwise feels right. The mark of the person who can actually make *progress* in thinking—who can sit down at 8:30 with one set of ideas and stand up at 11 with better ideas—is a willingness to notice and listen to these inconvenient little details, these annoying loose ends, these embarrassments or puzzles, instead of impatiently sweeping them under the rug. A good new idea looks obvious and

inevitable *after* it is all worked out and the dust has settled, but in the beginning it just feels annoying and the wrong old idea feels persuasively correct.

So when you first stumble onto this difficulty as you are engaged in writing out a draft, you don't know whether it is just an unimportant exception or whether it is trying to lead you to a new better view of things. You've struggled to work out your thinking and your organization and now this pesky detail calls it into question but gives you nothing to replace it with. You have nothing but a doubt, a difficulty, and some bent edges where you tried to force this puzzle piece into the only available opening.

It's at this point you have to make a decision. If you don't have the time or willingness to let things really come apart, then you'd better retreat and save this interesting dilemma till later. Since you can't make the puzzle piece fit your structure, you must somehow sweep it under the rug or put it in your pocket and hope no one notices. Distract your reader away from the unfilled hole to other issues. You can hope that your original idea and structure are in fact right and that this (now pocketed) detail only *looks* like an exception.

But if you are willing to follow this unravelling thread where it leads, you have to put aside everything you have already done. The most useful tactic at this point is usually to plunge into new, open, unworried writing: to think on paper and let this difficulty or seed of doubt grow. Follow new thoughts where they lead; plunge deeper into the forest of confusion. Here, in my experience, are the outcomes you can expect:

- Your new exploration may lead you quickly to a happy ending. You discover how to explain this apparent contradiction, and happily your main idea and original structure remain solid—indeed strengthened. The apparent contradiction may be unimportant and not worth mentioning or it may be very helpful to you as a vivid detail to illustrate your main idea.
- But sometimes this exception or anomaly, when you really let yourself explore it in a burst of new writing, leads you to a genuinely new idea or new way of looking at everything you have been saying. Perhaps your old idea is all wrong and must be scrapped altogether.
- Sometimes you go through an interesting change. First you see your new idea as right and your old idea as wrong, and you

immerse yourself in all the implications of the new idea. But then gradually you come around to see how the old "wrong" idea is nevertheless right *in a sense* or *in certain cases*. For now you see it through new eyes and you can explain it more fruitfully as a sub-case of your new idea.*

• The most frustrating outcome is when you pursue your contradiction farther and farther into the woods and you just get more and more lost. You are left entirely stuck. You have lost your faith in your original idea, but you haven't figured out anything coherent or complete to replace it with. In the long run this is a happy state of affairs: you are likely to be on to something important, you are charting new territory, this is the best kind of thinking—the kind that makes you smart and creative. But for the moment, you are stuck.

The most effective way to deal with this frustrating case is of course to take a break. Put your writing away and forget about it for more than a day or two. You should be doing this periodically throughout revising. But there is another tactic that also helps: stop trying to solve the dilemma and simply *accept* it and *describe* it. Stop beating your head against the wall, stop pushing so hard against an immovable object, take the pressure off your shoulders. Pretend that things are just fine as they stand now, in their state of contradiction or confusion, and *describe* the conflicting details or ideas as accurately and happily as you can. This will often lead to new perspective and a solution.

Of course you don't always have to take this detour through a mess. Most of the time you just write out your new draft as planned. I could make my story simpler by ignoring this occasional problem. But when the mess lands on you, you badly need assurance and help. And I suggest you be tolerant or even welcoming toward this whole process of things coming apart in your hands after you thought you had them all organized. It is the most trust-

*I went through this process numerous times, but I wasn't able to see clearly what was happening to me—it felt simply like fumbling—till I read Thomas Kuhn's interesting book on how the scientific community moves from one explanation of things to a new one, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1970). The classic case is Einstein discovering that Newtonian mechanics are all wrong—strictly speaking and from the largest perspective—but that in fact the Newtonian model still works for most events of human scale. In a sense, Einstein leaves all of Newtonian mechanics still standing validly in place, but forces scientists to understand it in a different light—as a special limited case of the larger principles of relativity.

worthy way to create new ideas. If these messes never happen to you, perhaps you are not listening sympathetically enough for pesky examples and contrary arguments.

At the end of this messy detour you *may* have to begin the revising process over again: mark the good bits, find your main point, make an outline, and write it out. But usually, once you have really thought through your reconceptualization, you can make adjustments to your draft without too much discomfort.

These detours reflect the fact that in any serious or difficult piece of writing you must sometimes move back and forth between getting words on paper and revising. Sometimes the producing process is given some focus by standing back and trying to revise and shape and make sense of things; and sometimes the revising process is perked up by a new immersion into the creative process of writing quickly—perhaps even writing off into an unknown direction. (See pp. 349–51, Chapter 28, for a fuller account of my own experience with this kind of alternation.)

## Strengthening Your Language

Next, *tighten and clean up your language.* The hardest work is done now. You have a newly written draft that says what you want to say in the right order. Nevertheless it is liable to be imprecise, wordy, and awkward. You need to stop being the writer and read over your draft with the fresh eyes of a reader. The best way is to put it aside for a while and then to read it over out loud.

In cleaning up your language you have two goals: precision and energy. The more you zero in on the precise meaning you have in mind, the more you can strip away unnecessary words and thereby energize your language. The key activity is crossing out words and sentences. Your new draft may have large chunks from your raw first-draft writing, rearranged with scissors and staples. These sections may need extensive cutting. When you wrote them during the producing process you were permitting yourself to write without necessarily making up your mind what you were saying. You were hurrying and allowing for ambiguity and ambivalence—driving a small crowd of horses down the road without making up your mind which one to ride on. It's natural to end up with too many meanings, too many words, too many strands—sometimes in one sentence. But now you have forced yourself to choose among

strands and decide exactly what you mean; you must ruthlessly throw away all the words that were part of abandoned strands. Some may feel very precious to you.

And even your new writing probably needs cutting. Although you were engaged in saying, as it were, only *one* thing instead of allowing for multiple possibilities, you probably didn't say it as clearly and economically as you can now when you look back as a *reader* instead of as a writer.

Remember that every word you throw away means another unit of energy preserved, another reader who may hang in there a bit longer before giving up. The psychological transaction that helps most in cutting is to read your words out loud. Look for places where you stumble or get lost in the middle of a sentence. These are obvious awkwardnesses that need fixing. Look for places where you get distracted or even bored—where you cannot concentrate. These are places where you probably lost focus or concentration in your writing. Cut through the extra words or vagueness or digression; get back to the energy. Listen even for the tiniest jerk or stumble in your reading, the tiniest lessening of your energy or focus or concentration as you say the words. Can you remember listening to someone read a story out loud and how you could tell when the reader got the tiniest bit bored or distracted and stopped giving full attention to the words? Listen for that when you read your own words. Listen for places where the words themselves seem to stop paying full attention to their own meaning.

These are all places where you need to increase the precision and energy in your language. You don't have to know what the problem is. No need for sophisticated diagnosis. It doesn't matter whether it is a modifier or a conjunction that is acting up. Just grab yourself by the shoulders, shake yourself, and insist that you mean business: "*Stop* beating around the bush. Just tell me what you mean to say. Stop *explaining* things or talking in 'essay' or translating what you have on your mind into 'writing' language: just *say* it!" Pretend someone is being this firm with you because he cares about you and wants to know what's on your mind.

A sentence should be alive. Does it sag in the middle or trail off at the end? Is it fog or mush? Sentences need energy to make the meaning jump off the page into the reader's head. As writer you must embed that energy in the sentence—coil the spring, set the trap. The meanings should spring up when the reader steps on the

first word. If you just leave your meanings lying around on the ground, readers will have to stoop over to pick them up. You won't have many readers except those who are doing you a favor or already want to know what you have to say—and even those readers won't get experiences from your words, only meanings.

The best sentence is the kind that comes out during the best moments of raw first-draft writing. You are warmed up, writing fast, excited, but not worried. You are fully involved in your meaning, not conscious of anything else. The sentence flows out alive and loud so the reader hears it. Obviously much of your raw writing won't be that way, and it's harder still to achieve that kind of language as you revise—when you are using language slowly, carefully, and consciously. Revising is like constructing a difficult mathematical equation: continually you must stop in the middle of sentences to ponder the right word, to search your memory for alternatives, to wonder whether this sentence fits what came before and comes after. Instead of the producing consciousness where you bend all your efforts singlemindedly toward making contact with what you are writing about—toward full participation with your meaning—in revising you must necessarily be thinking about the reader, about the structure of the whole, about whether your words are true. In good raw writing you *give birth* to sentences, in revising you have to construct them.

Ideal revising, perhaps, would consist only of crossing out and rearranging live words born in the producing process so that every word in the final draft has psychic energy invested in it. (I am exaggerating the value of your raw writing. Not all is alive. Much of it, rightly enough, is produced by slogging onwards when the spirit is dead. One of the main reasons for learning freewriting is so that you can keep on writing even when you are not in the mood.)

But if your raw writing doesn't contain the sentences you need ready-made or uncoverable, there's nothing for it but to *construct* the best sentences you can. Here are a few suggestions:

- After you have constructed the meaning that is right, force yourself to *say* the sentence out loud. It must sound strong and energetic.
- Think in terms of energy. If it's not there, make changes till it is. There is something important about clenching—clenching your jaws or your arms or hitting your hands against something hard.

Cut away unnecessary words and grunt energy into your constructions. Notice, for example, how I can turn an impossible sentence into one that is at least feasible by simply rearranging things as I clench for energy:

(Original): Intelligence, universalistic standards of evaluation, autonomy, flexibility, and rationally oriented legitimate achievements are features of this extended socialization.

(Revised): The extended socialization has these features: intelligence, autonomy, flexibility, universalistic standards of evaluation, and rationally oriented legitimate achievement.

It is an extreme example (it turns out to have been written by a noted sociologist) and I don't do anything to improve the worst problem of the sentence: the string of arrogant abstractions. But I want to illustrate how even these horrible inert lumps need not stop the flow of energetic syntax if we exaggerate the germ of energy. When the lumps of deadness come at the beginning they snuff out that fragile spark of life.

• Simplify. In your best moments during the producing process—when you are warmed up and writing with intensity and involvement, you can produce long and complex sentences, even gnarled or involuted ones, that nevertheless have energy and life. But when you are having to construct sentences as you revise, it's much harder to breathe life into something long. Clench your jaw. Break that long sentence into three short ones. You may not be able to get genuine life into your sentences as you revise, but you can at least make verbs active and lively, leave out extra words, and keep sentences from dribbling out to a flabby end, like this one does, so it drains energy from the reader.

• Use active verbs, avoid the passive voice and too much of the verb "to be." The previous section, for example, begins with the one-word sentence "simplify." Originally I had written "Be simple," and then "Use simplicity," but I realized in revising that I could slightly increase the life by using a plain active verb—which is pure energy—instead of an adjective or noun ("simple" and "simplicity") which are pieces of used up energy.

• Almost everything in *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White is good advice for this stage of revising. It's small and usable and a pleasure.

Final step in thorough revising: *get rid of mistakes in grammar and usage.* (See Chapter 15.)

## Summary

The main weapon in thorough revising is time—especially for breaks and vacations. Here are the main steps.

- Fix readers and purpose in mind.
- Read over raw writing and mark important bits.
- Find your main point.
- Put the parts in order on the basis of your main idea.
- Make a draft.
- Possible detour: deal with a breakdown.
- Tighten and clean up your language. Reading out loud helps.
- Remove mistakes in grammar and usage.

# 13

# Revising with Feedback

Revising with feedback is the most powerful way to revise, and happily enough it is also the most interesting and enjoyable technique. No-revising relies on a magical polishing process inside you—using luck and your unconscious. Quick revising relies on a detached critical consciousness: you step out of your involvement with your writing and clean it up with dispassionate pragmatic eyes; you can make quick harsh decisions because you haven't got time to vacillate, you must cut your losses. Thorough revising relies most of all upon time—more time for careful wrestling and more time in addition for setting your writing aside, which gives you newer, fresher eyes than you could get by mere will power or any vow to be dispassionate. Cut-and-paste revising (next chapter) relies on aesthetic intuition. When you revise with feedback you are of course trying to use all these faculties, but in addition you are using the most powerful tool of all: the eyes of others.

## How Much Feedback and When

You can bring feedback into the revising process either early or late. If you bring it in early you are in effect using the reactions of others as part of the very process of making up your own mind. If you bring it in late, you are reaching all your conclusions alone but using the reactions of others to help you make those conclusions *work* better on readers.

You will want to hold off on feedback till the end if you are in a

hurry or if you know you don't want to make any changes in your thinking or if you are nervous about using feedback. In these situations you get feedback only once and you use it only for making minor or cosmetic changes. But bring feedback in early if you want the most powerful and interesting process and have time. It means getting feedback on two or more drafts and inviting others to be part of a slower and more organic process as you work out your thinking.

Here's how this longer process might look. You start by producing a draft. It's probably something you've long wanted to work on, something important to you, not something you have to force yourself to write for a deadline. You revise it enough to make it interesting and readable, but you aren't trying to make it your best work. You don't spend much time revising it and it probably doesn't represent your final thinking. (Cut-and-paste revising is especially useful here.) It probably has serious problems of structure and consistency. But it must be readable.

You get two friends to read it and then you sit down with them. You are more interested in their thoughts on the whole matter than their criticisms of your writing. Why try to fix weaknesses when you will probably take a whole new approach on your next draft? The conversation with them helps you see the whole thing in better perspective, gives you new ideas, and helps you make up your own mind what you think. Your draft was really just a letter to friends exploring your thinking.

On the basis of this first step of informal feedback you can "re-see" the whole thing and write a brand new draft—not just strengthen that first draft.* On this draft, too, your main priority is not to try to get it right, perfect, make up your mind once and for all (unless you are in a hurry and know you have to stop with this draft). You are trying to let the whole thing develop slowly through your interaction with others. Wait patiently for things to jell. Again, you get readers to give you feedback on this draft: perhaps the same readers, perhaps new ones. And here, too, you are interested in all their thinking on the topic, not just their reactions to your writing. At this point things may click and it may be very clear to you how you want your final draft to go; but perhaps not.

*Occasionally, of course, you find that you stumbled onto the right idea and the right structure the first time and so now you are just improving that first draft rather than writing a completely new one.

You may take it through this process once or even twice again depending on your time and on how much you care.

Indeed, other people's feedback can lead you to a whole new understanding of the writing process so you develop a much longer time frame. That is, perhaps the feedback you get on this second round is very confusing: each reader has entirely different reactions, feelings, suggestions. You know your piece of writing isn't right yet, isn't done, but you are unclear about what changes to make. Perhaps you realize it could evolve in two very different directions but you don't know which you prefer. But you also know it's already good. Good enough, if you just polish it slightly, that others will want to read it; good enough perhaps even to publish. You are not done in the long run, but you know you have carried it as far as you want for now. You need to give it time to settle, give yourself time to have new thoughts and experiences and grow into a slightly different person. Then months or even years later you come back to it. You revise it and finally get it right.

I have let my story of a typical case of revising with feedback stretch into an extreme case. But the point I want to make is that when you revise with feedback, you develop a looser and more conditional sense of what it means to be *"done."* Instead of a clear one-step change from *rough draft* to *final draft*—from raw to cooked in one transaction—you are allowing a gradual evolution through time and through successive audiences. At each stage you can call your draft "done" or "not done" depending on how you want to use it. On the one hand you start using the word "done" early: you learn to polish slightly and re-type even your earliest drafts so that they are useful for others to read. But on the other hand, you learn to think of things as "undone" on into late drafts since you know that hearing the reactions of others can trigger continued growth even when you thought your mind was made up.

Enormous benefits flow from this odd flexibility about when to call something done. You aren't always struggling for perfection, worrying "Do I really know enough yet?" Instead of wrestling to get it right on the first try, you experiment without anxiety on different approaches and *wait* for the right way to pop into your mind. It will. There's a wonderful deep thud you feel when your meaning finally drops into place—just what you wanted to say—which is hard to achieve without trying out a draft or two on real readers and feeling how they understand your words.

Perhaps it seems as though this approach allows for too much indecision. I hear a tough person saying, "There's something wrong with all this tentativeness. Damn it, you can't write unless you learn to make up your mind." Which is true. Writing *is* a process of making up your mind, and much bad writing is bad because the writer didn't have the guts to do so—or because he made up his mind but still had inner doubts which fog up his writing and prevent him from asserting his conclusion crisply. The point is, though, that most people make up their minds better if they do so gradually without being under too much pressure.

This method of successive drafts not only helps you be more decisive in your final draft, it also helps you write more decisively on earlier drafts. You aren't committed to what you write on early drafts, so you don't have to hedge and be cautious. You find it easier to use bold strokes and definite language—to avoid the mumbling qualifications and maybe's that destroy strong writing. And sometimes you discover that an interesting hunch is true only because you permitted yourself to overstate it, go with it, and thereby discover arguments and evidence you never would have thought of if you had remained judicious.

Once you start enjoying the power of this slower interactive way of revising, you will learn to use it for other writing, not just pieces you want to write for yourself at a relaxed pace. You will learn to handle deadlines differently. If you have a month, you will be eager to use this new leverage of feedback and get yourself to produce an exploratory draft in a week so there are three more weeks for feedback and more drafts. Even if you only have a week, you will discover that you can dash off a draft tonight—since the pressure is off—and get at least one round of feedback and discussion before you have to figure out what you really think.

Your decision about when to bring in feedback, then, turns out in the end not to depend so much on *time* as on how much you want of that creative mess in which you let the thinking of others get all mixed up with your own. Here is a schematic summary of your options:

1. Minimal feedback. You should *always* use feedback to help you eliminate errors in grammar and usage from any final draft that needs to be polished—no matter what kind of revising you engage in. But don't let them talk about what you are saying or how you say it—just spelling, grammar, and usage.

2. Little feedback. You don't have much time or you don't like feedback or for some reason you want to keep others largely out of your writing process. You get one round of feedback only at the end, and you know you will stick with your conclusions no matter what they say. But you can still get enormous benefits from their reactions. Even if they happen to think you are dead wrong in one of your major ideas, their objection will help you make improvements in how you present that idea. For example:

- explain the idea entirely differently,
- insert a needed clarification or defense,
- remove a troublesome example or detail,
- put the idea in a different place in your whole structure.

And their reactions will help you make other small but important changes:

- remove bits that don't work,
- untangle some snarls in language or logic,
- change an annoying tone of voice here and there,
- insert some little introductions or transitions or clarifications that may make all the difference in the world to a reader's staying with you or not.

"Please find mistakes in spelling, grammar, and usage; and any awkward or unclear sentences. Don't tell me if you dislike or disagree with my thinking. I haven't got the time or strength for any major rewriting. But please point out places where you think I make an absolute fool of myself." This is a feedback request I sometimes make of my wife—usually at the last minute.

3. Medium feedback. Your mind is made up about your main message. You aren't willing to give yourself the grief of rethinking your position entirely, but you are willing to engage in *major* revisions of structure and strategy. Perhaps you argued your case through abstract reasoning, but feedback convinces you it's worth trying to do it almost entirely through example or anecdote. Perhaps feedback convinces you that you have to turn your whole structure upside down. Usually your revisions are less drastic. Once you understand what is confusing or bothering a reader, it is usually not too difficult to find a way to deal with the problem.

4. Lots of feedback. Everything is up for grabs from the beginning. You share drafts from the start—before you know your thinking. You let the interaction carry you on a voyage of discovery.

The crucial thing is to decide how much of the feedback process

you want. As I finish typing on this sheet of paper and take it out of the typewriter and put it face down on the pile to my right, I am reminded of how sometimes I don't want much. For I notice on the back (I usually write on the back of already-used paper); it says "Draft III, FSU, DR, p. 17." This is the third draft of a chapter David Riesman wrote about a competence-based program at Florida State University and circulated to readers for feedback. And yet I am on at least the third draft of this chapter now and haven't let anyone see what I've written. (I will get some feedback before I finish with it.) Sometimes, in short, I just want to work out my ideas myself. "I can do it my *own self*," says Abby, age three, as I start to help her with something difficult and she pushes my hands roughly away.

But Abby's phrase is ominous too. For sometimes after she has pushed me away, she must come back sheepishly and ask for help. And so have I numerous times had to put a draft through a major change later on after I thought it was settled but late feedback shows me I'm wrong. I fight the change harder when I've already invested so much work and made up my mind. It would have been easier if I had been willing to bring in feedback earlier. On other pieces of writing—where I feel more secure or unpossessive—I'm comfortable with bringing in feedback from the start.

You may be surprised by a powerful side effect of using feedback for revising—especially if you bring in feedback early. You may find that after years and years of strenuous but unsuccessful efforts to make your writing clear for *real* readers—teachers, employers, editors, strangers—all of a sudden you can write much more clearly now that you are just cleaning up a rough draft for a friend to read and respond to. You aren't even trying to make it your best writing yet your language turns out clearer, simpler, more direct. Once you realize that your reader is a friend and helper, sometimes you cut right through that abstractness or complicatedness or fog that has plagued you for so long. The important point psychologically is that when we write for "real audiences" like teachers and employers, the stakes are very high and we get too clenched. What's more we are liable, without realizing it, to feel the reader as *enemy*. After all, they *are* the enemy: they've hurt us deeply time and again in the past, the dirty bastards. When, on the other hand, we feel the reader as genuine friend and ally, suddenly

words flow more easily and humanly. This effortless change of audience can do more than all your strenuous wrestling in the past.

Your main task in getting feedback is to listen and see if you can experience what your reader is experiencing. If you succeed in doing so you will be able to see whether there's really something there to fix and if so how to fix it. Try being totally silent after you ask a few questions. Avoid the temptation to keep talking about what *you* had in mind; try discovering what you got into *their* minds. Try *believing* your readers: not so you are stuck with their view forever, but so you can see your writing through their eyes. You are not yet trying to make up your mind about anything, you are trying to enlarge your mind. You probably made up your mind as you wrote your draft so in a sense you are trying to unmake your mind. For more about how to get feedback see Section V.

The essential skill in all revising is the ability to look at your own writing and see potentialities: see what is almost there or sort of there or even to see what is not there at all but ought to be. It is like the ability to look at a room and see how it *could* look with different furniture differently arranged. More specifically you need:

- to see what the words don't yet say but want to say,
- to see a potential shape that's not yet there but which would make everything click,
- to see a simple way to say something that's now roundabout,
- to see bits you can leave out, even though you love them.

Time, intuition, and a detached critical consciousness are obviously helpful tools if you want to look at your writing and see what could be there. But nothing is so powerful as a chance to see your words through the eyes of others.

# 14

# Cut-and-Paste Revising and the Collage

One of the great advantages of an approach to writing where you make a mess during the first half is that you have to clean up that mess before you are done. You can't let yourself slip into half-hearted, soft-minded revising where you just tidy things up and call it a day. Making a mess means that your revising tool is not a touch-up brush, to start with anyway, but a chain saw. It means that you can't possibly revise without stopping and thinking hard about what you really mean, about what you are trying to accomplish—even if you think you already made those decisions. The main message about revising in this book is that it is a lot of work.

But there is an easy way to revise—not simple but relatively quick and effortless: cut-and-paste revising. It's especially useful if you are in a hurry or don't care too much, but it can also lead to very good final drafts. Better, sometimes, than you achieve with other methods of revising.

For one of the most frequent problems in writing, especially creative writing, is making things worse instead of better when you revise. You start out with raw writing that you know has good things in it, or perhaps you've even worked out a coherent draft and you are pleased with its strengths, its life. But obviously it needs revising. So you revise. But when you finish you discover you've snuffed the life out of your piece. You've removed the problems you were trying to get rid of but somehow you've also destroyed or crippled what was good. (See note, p. 107, for a case of this problem.)

Cutting and pasting is a minimal revising process that helps you

get rid of what's weak without undermining what's strong. You let your good passages speak for themselves but you don't add the flat-footed writing that sometimes comes later as you try to make sure that all your ideas get through clearly—or in the case of poems, stories, and plays, the soggy writing that often comes when you start "clarifying" and interpreting your own imaginative vision.

The essential process is obvious. *Cut-and-paste* virtually says it all. In effect you throw away your pen or pencil and revise with nothing but scissors and paste. You will be like a stone sculptor who never adds anything—only removes. Or like one of those painters who first applies a number of layers of pigment on the canvas and then creates a painting solely by scraping with a knife. There is an act of discipline and faith here. You must insist on finding the ingredients you need in what you've already put on paper. And you must insist on creating the coherence you need by rearranging, not rewriting. Thus this method only works well when you've achieved some richness in your raw writing.

The steps are as follows.

- Find the good passages and cut them away from their surroundings—even if you need to cut in mid-sentence. And cross out the words and phrases that can be removed even from these good passages. Unnecessary words.
- By looking over these good passages and playing with different sequences for them, and by thinking back over the rest of your raw writing, try to figure out what essential thread or shape or meaning is trying to emerge from it all. (This is different from other revising processes where you might look through your raw writing and see that it more or less says X; but then realize—perhaps by seeing it on paper—that Y is really what you want to say: such revising permits you to change your mind. But with cut-and-paste revising you must find the best thread in your material and go with it. You aren't so much deciding *what you want to say*, as you are sensing *what is good* and seeing what it points to.) You may need to make some kind of outline or visual plan at this point if your piece is at all complicated.
- Next put your pieces in their best order. It can be intriguing to make a game of it and see if you can actually finish the job with this step and produce a final coherent draft with no new writing at all. But this purist puzzle-solving approach will probably use up any time you might otherwise save with the cut-and-paste method.

- Now that all your pieces are in the right order, do what little writing is necessary to connect them and make a complete and coherent whole. There may be some places where you need to add something entirely lacking in your raw writing. There may be some places where you can't get your fragments to connect with each other except by adding a sentence or two. And you may feel the need for a freshly written introduction or conclusion. But be sure to experiment with passages you already have. Often what looks like an unlikely passage will click into place when you actually try it out in that beginning or ending slot.
- You will probably be able to tighten and clarify a bit as you copy it over and remove mistakes in grammar and usage.

The cut-and-paste method, especially if you are trying to save time and effort, should result in a stripped-down kind of final draft. The weaknesses will consist primarily of omissions, but omissions often do less harm than passages that don't work. Indeed if you get skilled with this method, you can begin to achieve effects—as in those bare Picasso line drawings—where the minimalism is a strength and not a weakness.

## The Collage

A collage consists not of a single perfectly connected train of explicit thinking or narrative but rather of *fragments:* arranged how shall we say?—poetically? intuitively? randomly? Without transitions or connectives. (On rare occasions the joints can be invisible.) When it works it is terrific. Indeed, there is often a deeper impact on readers because the collage invites them to create actively out of their own consciousness the vision which organizes those fragments—the sparks which cross those gaps. But when a collage doesn't work it seems merely opaque or annoying—a lazy cop-out.

Simple collage stories or poems or plays don't feel very odd to many readers now. Perhaps we get a glimpse of the main character in the subway in the morning; then a picture of his daydream as he takes part in a meeting at an oval table; then a dialogue with his wife over the dinner coffee; then an evocation of him brushing his teeth; then a piece of childhood experience as he is falling asleep. Much poetry and some fiction go farther. They don't just leave gaps in chronology, they abandon it. They arrange scenes, images,

scraps of dialogue or meditation in an intuitive or associative order rather than logically or chronologically. Many writers and readers seem to have agreed that the goals which are served by clearly explained conventional narratives—perhaps to convey a complex experience, a vision of the world, a sense of a person's life—can also be achieved with fragments or pieces arranged differently. T. S. Eliot's "The Wasteland," to name a cultural landmark, is a collage. So too, obviously, is much modern poetry.

Collage writing can be produced by careful planning from the start, but there's a much simpler way which is not out of place since the organization of a collage seems by its nature to invite intuition. First, do lots of raw writing; then look through it all to find the good bits; tighten and polish them to make them even better; and, finally, lay them out on the table or floor where you can see them all at once and find the best order for them.

The heart of the matter is that instead of emphasizing unity and coherence and singleness as your principle of revising, your only rule is this: get rid of everything dead, keep everything alive.

It's a great relief to stop trying for coherence and connectedness. So often you have these *good* pieces of writing and somehow they trick you into bad writing: you need a way to lead up to one of them, then ways to get from one to another, and finally a way to end the whole thing, and before you know it your whole piece of writing is weak and soggy. Some professional writers have learned to finesse this problem. Just stick with what is already good. Period. No faltering beginnings or sagging ends, no dead spots where you keep trying to make something work but it doesn't. It's a good way to write a biography, autobiography, or novel: a succession of live moments. It's surprising how much can be left out, how much need not be said.

If your final piece has nothing in it but strong writing, much organizational weakness can be forgiven. But the odd thing is that when you stop trying for unity and connectedness and put all your effort into just getting rid of what doesn't work, you often discover a surprising coherence lurking in your pile of good pieces. Many of the worst problems of organization really come from trying to organize pieces when some are weak. Hasn't it often happened to you that you struggle and struggle unsuccessfully to get from P to Q and then suddenly realize you can junk Q and end up with a lovely transition from P to R? And Q wasn't that good to start with.

## Collage Essays

Once you start working with this odd but liberating principle—throw away everything that doesn't work and shake up the good bits to see how they want to arrange themselves—it turns out that you can apply it to expository writing: essays, reports, profiles. Essays are a traditionally loose form: the essay, when it was invented, was an "assay," that is, a "try," a "go at" something. Some of the best essays have been informal, chatty, and associative in structure. But whereas essays have traditionally had a strong conversational thread, here you don't worry about a thread at all, you just look for quality. You get an *implied thread* to assert itself by arranging the good bits in the right order. I remember a recent *New Yorker* profile of a college professor (volume 55, number 43, February 18, 1980) which was really a string of paragraphs or groups of paragraphs, each one tending to begin with "——— at the office," or "——— talking to students," or "——— taking a walk." Lazy and simple, but it worked. And there was an implied thread. The object of a transition is to get you from A to B. If you can do it without the transition, why waste the reader's time?

The loop writing process is an ideal way to produce material for a collage essay: something that fulfills the function of an essay but is made up almost entirely of passages in which you try to give your reader an experience of what you are saying rather than an explanation of it.

Sometimes one of your good bits will explain clearly and directly what you are trying to say in the whole piece (or what you discover those good pieces of writing are trying to say). Such a passage will probably go well at the beginning or the end of your collage. If there is no such piece in your original writing, you must figure out what your essay is driving at as you contemplate and arrange your good fragments, and on that basis write an introduction or conclusion.

Many feature stories in daily and especially Sunday newspapers drift into the collage form—for example, a neighborhood in Brooklyn written up in a series of bits that present rather than explain: portraits of people and of terrain, street corner scenes, mini-narratives, dialogues, and reminiscent monologues.

I'm struck with the way many regular news stories now jettison the traditional who-what-when-where opening—or rather delay

it—in order to begin with a bit of collage: a piece of presentation-without-explanation. Here is the beginning of a story about a policy change at city hall—a story from the first section of *The New York Times*—but notice how it begins with a little piece of particularized drama:

> *Under New Mayor, Philadelphia Police Shift Tactics*
> By LESLIE BENNETTS (Special to *The New York Times*)
>
> PHILADELPHIA, April 11 [1980]—A couple of weeks ago, Marlene Nimmo strolled up to a woman in a midtown bar and asked her if she had any nickle bags. The woman reached into her brassiere and pulled out two bags of marijuana—whereupon Mrs. Nimmo showed her police identification and said, "You're under arrest."
>
> "Her eyes bugged out, her jaw dropped open, and she was in a complete state of shock," Mrs. Nimmo recounted. She said, "When did this happen? This isn't supposed to be!" Mrs. Nimmo laughed. "I fool the daylights out of them; I make the buy and I make the bust. They'll sell to a woman because they don't know any women are narcs."
>
> Until recently, drug dealers were correct in their belief . . .

and so on into a conventional news story about changes in policy in the mayor's office and reasons for these changes.

Jane Howard's book *Families* (New York, 1978) is really a collage in which she presents portraits of all sorts of families and family arrangements. She spells out her message or conclusion in the introduction and the final chapter. Ken Macrorie's *Uptaught* (Rochelle Park, N.J., 1970) is a memoir of experiences and an argument about teaching. He makes it a collage in which experiential fragments such as narratives and portraits are intermingled with conceptual passages explaining his argument. Martin Duberman, in writing a careful history of Black Mountain College, includes fragments from his own diary and imaginary dialogues between himself and some of these characters he never met (*Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community*, Garden City, N.Y., 1973).

You might make a collage essay on the causes of the French Revolution that consists entirely of stories, portraits, and scenes. You would have to choose and arrange your fragments in such a way that they tell why the French Revolution happened as it did. Or you might have one that consists entirely of dialogues: between nobles, peasants, middle-class city dwellers, and thinkers of the

period; between people who came before and those who came afterwards. Of course you may have to revise and polish some of these fragments to make them as good as possible—perhaps even write some more bits to give at least a minimal coherence.

You could write a collage essay that explores the meaning of a poem or another work of art by juxtaposing brief passages from the poem with incidents from your own experience or from history or other works of literature. An essay about a work of art or scholarship could consist of an interview between you and the author or between the author and one or two of the characters who figure in it.

## Options in the Collage Form

Perhaps an essay—strictly defined—must spell out its conclusions explicitly. But you can take the collage principle a bit further and write an effective collage which fulfills many of an essay's functions but doesn't *say* what it is saying. It only presents ingredients. Studs Terkel's *Working* (New York, 1972), for example, is a book-length collage which nowhere explicitly concludes anything from all those monologues, scenes, and portraits of people's experiences of work. The question is whether we understand what Terkel wanted to say. When you just present ingredients, different readers draw different conclusions.

But if you do it just right, readers *will* understand what you are saying, and your message will go deeper for the very reason that readers create it themselves, they don't read it. You've used a purely inductive method. But it's easy to miss. And readers can be understandably suspicious that perhaps you were just too lazy to think your way through your material to a conclusion. They'll think you're just borrowing the style of bad TV documentaries: blip/blip/blip vividness-with-no-thinking.

On some occasions you may not even care whether your readers reach your conclusion or indeed whether they bother to reach any conclusion at all. Your goal is only to get these incidents and issues and facts and dilemmas into their consciousness. In certain circumstances you increase your chances of success if you don't even give your own conclusions so that readers don't get distracted by the question of whether they agree or disagree with you. You trust

your material itself, sooner or later, to have the effect on readers that you want.

And on some occasions, finally, you haven't even reached any conclusions yourself and are not trying to pretend that you have. You are working on something important and you need a few more days or months of living with your material before you can figure out your conclusion and work out a final structure. But you need a finished draft now. Or you want a draft to give others to help you with your simmering. In such a circumstance you can still produce a powerful piece of writing in the collage form.

Thus the collage essay provides you with a continuum of choices about how explicit to be. At one end is a piece whose meaning is totally implicit consisting of associatively arranged ingredients: virtually an evocation or even a poem rather than what most people call an essay. At the other end is an orthodox essay (a completely connected explicit argument) which you interrupt only intermittently with blips of scene, portrait, dialogue, or narrative in order to make your meanings more alive.*

## Summary

- The essential process in cut-and-paste revising: try to avoid all rewriting; make do with clever excerpting, ruthless pruning, and imaginative rearranging. Cut-and-paste revising is most useful if you are in a hurry or if you have a tendency to squelch all the life out of your raw writing as you revise.
- The essential process in the collage: choose what is alive and discard what is dead; polish the good pieces and figure out how they want to arrange themselves.
- The essential process in the collage essay: don't just explain your meaning (or don't explain it at all); convey your meaning with passages which evoke it or recreate it or present it, such as scenes, portraits, tiny narratives, dialogues, or internal musings. Make your argument or conceptual meaning somehow give birth to itself inside your reader's head.
- It would probably be a mistake to give up orthodox essays al-

*This is what I was trying for in my chapter on competence-based teaching in *On Competence: A Critical Analysis of Competence-based Reforms in Higher Education*, Gerald Grant *et al.* (San Francisco, 1979).

together. You need to master that form because it is so often called for. In certain circumstances you will put some readers off merely by adding a few blips of experiential writing to an essay which is otherwise fully explicit, reasoned, and connected. ("You can't trust his thinking. He's a creative writer. He's too emotional.") And you can get lazy because the collage form requires so much less work. You can get in the habit of not quite figuring out any conclusions from your material. An orthodox essay may not always provide you with the best way to *have* ideas or even to convey ideas to readers, but it usually provides the best way to clarify, evaluate, and develop further the ideas you have already figured out.

## Two Collage Essays

Collage essays may sound odd, unfamiliar, and difficult to imagine. For that reason I conclude with two examples written by students in two of my classes. I led these classes in the use of the loop writing process for producing raw writing. I don't know whether the summing-up or explaining passages in the following essays were written as part of the original raw writing or were written later during the cutting and pasting process.

The first piece was in response to an assignment entitled "What am I doing Teaching?" that I gave to a class of primary and secondary school teachers. Though the title may suggest something theoretical, I made it clear I was asking for a concrete and practical piece of work. I said, in effect, "you will sometimes lose sight of what you are really doing and why; in the midst of day to day struggle you may lose the focus or foundation of your teaching that you most need for keeping it up and doing a good job. In this paper, therefore, figure out your priorities so that if you get confused or have to retreat under pressure you will be able to hold fast to the main thing." (I am indebted to Lester Krupp for the idea of this assignment as an aid to survival.)

*What Am I Doing Teaching?*
by Cathy Ellis

I want a purpose and teaching gives it to me. All the inequality, unfairness in the world—I can make a stab at it in teaching, I can even it out a little.

I remember being placed in a reading group in first grade. My group was group two. We sat at an ordinary wooden table with ordi-

nary wooden chairs. Group one sat at a pastel yellow table with pastel yellow chairs. They read better than we. They were treated better than we. They were given the special picture of Santa Claus to color at Christmas time while the rest of us read. I didn't like them very much and yet I terribly wanted to sit at that yellow table. I asked the teacher once why none of the rest of us got to sit at the yellow table or got to play games like they did or color special pictures. It's funny but I remember thinking she was embarrassed. She looked like I did when I'd been caught doing something wrong. When she answered she sounded as if she were angry with me. She said that they worked harder. They earned their privileges. I didn't understand. I thought I worked hard, but I was afraid to ask any more.

In later years, during high school, I and a group of friends were turned away from a high school dance because we arrived late. We stood back and watched while another group, a couple of cheerleaders and their friends, were admitted after we were turned away. That night I wrote a letter to the editor of our local newspaper complaining of favoritism in our schools. I made a couple of copies, and friends and I passed them around school to obtain signatures. At the end of the day we had over one hundred signatures and the threat that if we returned to school with the letter the following day, it would be confiscated and we would be sent home. The principal wanted each of those signing the letter sent to the office in the way of a warning. There was some talk of suspending the instigators from school. The school board instructed the administration to leave us all alone. And yet I wonder if we would have been dealt with the same if my father had not been the editor of the paper.

Dear Trevor, Richard, and Pacer,

The reason I decided to teach, the reason I continue to teach is for children like you. Children who never seem to have a fair break, for whom school is just one more put down, while the other children continue to get the awards, the honors. I want to even up the score—for you and for my whole childhood which was not nearly so devastating as yours (however, at times I felt it was).

I think at least a moment of childhood should be grand for everyone—and learning should be the most exciting part. I want the learning to be that moment for you. Because maybe then you'll be able to make that moment last forever—or at least recall it whenever in need. If that happens, then maybe I've compensated just a little for the unfairness of childhood, the inequalities of life.

Sincerely,
MRS. ELLIS

A portrait of Trevor: when he received his first award for completing his work for the week. A look of surprise, followed by a shy smile. Pug nose looking more in place rather than an out-of-place feature on an adult face. Sauntering up to pick out his prize. Trying not to lose all of his Mr. Cool.

A portrait of Pacer: when he completed his math page correctly and independently, his whole face was a smile, no longer trying to give an impression of Mr. Tough Guy; totally unaware; a candid photograph.

An important moment. The classroom in the morning before the bell. Children waiting for me at the door. Smiles. Rush of words prefaced by "Teacher!" The door opens—a room that begins only to exist at this moment each day—warm little bodies file in. Desks open and shut. Security settles in. All's the same. More remarks to teacher. I'm busy. Children follow me. I hang up yesterday's pictures, writing. Children madly search to find theirs. "That's mine teacher. See?" Friends. A good feeling. The whistle blows from outside. Stragglers come in. Order presents itself. All in their seats. Lunch count. It's begun.

A bad moment. A writing assignment for my 6th grade English class. I explain, "It's not much I'm asking of you, just a paragraph or story paragraph, so to speak. Tell me about a good moment you've had. Everyone has had some good moments. Try to include some color and sound words. Make me see the moment."

"Does it have to be something good?"

"Surely you can think of one good moment."

"No, nothing good ever happens to me." Subdued laughter from the class. Several other voices join in:

"Nothing good ever happens to us."

"All right then, pick a bad moment, but write something." I feel myself fighting the desperation in my voice. I hear a chorus of "Do we have to?" Defiant faces, turning around, talking to each other. I'm hurt, I'm angry.

"All right, I'll give you a choice. You can write the paragraph I suggested or copy from a dictionary. Which has more meaning for you?"

Half a dozen children or more move out of their desks, smirks on their faces, and shuffle over to the shelves for dictionaries. Good God, they're even drawing the illustrations. One shows me hers for my approval. Wants to know if she can do more dictionary work for extra credit. She's serious. I don't believe it.

Last night I dreamed I hit one of them. The solid feel of flesh smacking flesh. It felt good. It scares me. I've got to get out of here.

So after a year of attempting to reach the twelve to thirteen year olds, I returned to my first grade classroom. It was like another good moment—going home.

A first grade language assignment. Sun shines in through our windows, lighting up the playing fields, reflecting on the bars and jungle gym, drying up yesterday's mud puddles.

"Let's write about what you like to do in the sun." A blizzard of hands in the air.

"I got one teacher, I got one." Decisions. I choose a hand, a face:

"I like to lay in the sun." I write it down on the chart. Giggles in the background as I draw a little stick figure of Donny lying under the sun.

More hands. More choices. A bombardment of words, ideas. Soon the chart is covered with sentences, pictures, holding a special meaning for each child. A scramble for pencils, crayons, paper. A vying for position—each child looking for his story or his friend's.

It seems I've no sooner sat down than papers are waving in my face.

"Look, teacher, look at mine."

"Read it teacher." Or better yet, "I can read it teacher. Listen. I watch the clouds. See, that's me and there's the clouds." Such a smile. He just grasped a tiny part of the world.

Dialogue.

Vickie: "Sure they all love you. But little kids drive me crazy. At least fourth graders can take care of themselves."

Me: "So can first graders, and they have much more potential. It hasn't been squelched by previous education. They're moldable and full of creativity."

Vickie: "And running noses and colds. You can have them."

Me: "Thanks. I'll take them."

Portrait of me by a colleague.

Cathy is a very idealistic person. She thinks she might save the world from the classroom. The first grade classroom at that. She feels she has a sensitivity maintained by the very few that allows her to understand and reach children in a way others couldn't. And because of this ability of hers she feels she will reach her children in such a way that they might literally save the world.

Basically, Cathy lacks realism. She forgets her children grow up, they change. Trevor, Pacer, and Richard might make some headway in the first grade, but they will revert to their basic natures by adoles-

cence. They need firmness a great deal more than they need Cathy's pampering. But she'll continue with her idealistic ways because that is the only way she can teach and the only reason that she does teach.

Finally I reach the point where I must answer the question, "What am I doing teaching?" My first thought was to share this title with my fellow teachers. Somehow I knew we could all have a chuckle over it. Why? Because the title says so much and so little. What am I doing teaching? How often does a teacher ask herself that? I'm trying to find a purpose—satisfaction—make my life worthwhile.

So I chose teaching. I wanted to contribute. First I wanted older children—old enough to be intellectually stimulating, but young enough to be innovative. Middle school age. I found the primary children were a little more of both—at least for me and for my personality.

I don't like discipline. I resented being on the receiving end as a child and I detest being on the giving end as an adult. But with the younger children, even though they may require discipline, I find I needn't distort my personality to work with them. I can be myself. I need that to find satisfaction.

But satisfaction isn't altogether purpose. Purpose comes from achieving a lasting impression, one that makes you a bit immortal.

First grade reeks with purpose. In nine months' time the printed word gains meaning. Non-readers become readers. Children unable to express themselves on paper without adult assistance transform into mini-authors. Numbers have gained meaning and their world has become more comprehensible. The children feel a little better about themselves because of me. They know someone cares for them—their first grade teacher—and they remember. Over the years they come back to visit—and a piece of my spirit travels in each of them.

Pre-writing and first grade are much the same: a creative flow, a build up of the creative process, a period of productivity when confidences are built and ideas planted. Only after this period of time has been exhausted in thought and activity is the writer ready to evaluate and revise his work. And only after a full year in first grade is the child ready and able to handle criticism. Only after a beginning successful year is he able to say, "OK, that was wrong. There is more where that came from." All the more reason to stress the beginning years—to emphasize the positive, the creative. First grade builds a well to draw from and success demands that it be full. That's the essence of a first grade teacher: she opens the first doors of the mind. My reason for teaching: I want to open that door for *all* my children, and maybe just a little wider for those children forgotten in the foreground.