

Donald M. Murray

MAKING MEANING CLEAR: THE LOGIC OF REVISION

The writer's meaning rarely arrives by room-service, all neatly laid out on the tray. Meaning is usually discovered and clarified as the writer makes hundreds of small decisions, each one igniting a sequence of consideration and reconsideration.

Revision is not just clarifying meaning, it is discovering meaning and clarifying it while it is being discovered. That makes revision a far more complicated process than is usually thought—and a far simpler process at the same time.

It is complicated because the writer cannot just go to the rule book. Revision is not a matter of correctness, following the directions in a manual. The writer has to go back again and again and again to consider what the writing means and if the writer can accept, document, and communicate that meaning. In other words, writing is not what the writer does after the thinking is done; writing is thinking.

This also makes revision simpler. There is a logic to the process. The writer needs only a draft, a pen, and a brain. Each editorial act must relate to meaning. That is the primary consideration that rules each editorial decision. Considerations of audience, structure, tone, pace, usage, mechanics, typography are primarily decided on one issue: do they make the meaning clear?

The process of revision—what the reviser does—is fairly simple. The writer cuts, adds, reorders, or starts over. Each of these acts fits into a sequence most of the time. The writer solves the problems of meaning, and those solutions make it possible to solve the problems of order, and those solutions make it possible to solve the problems of voice.

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Unfortunately, many teachers—and, I have discovered recently, many newspaper editors—do not understand the logic of revision and, therefore, do not encourage or even allow revision. They pounce on first draft writing and make corrections.

Since most writers have not discovered their meaning in their first draft, the corrections editors make must come from the editors' own preconception of what the writing should mean. It comes from the editors' own experience, their own research, their own prejudices. They work in ignorance of the writer's intentions and take the writing away from the writer.

When editors or teachers kidnap the first draft, they also remove the responsibility for making meaning from the writer. Writing becomes trivialized, unchallenging, unauthoritative, impersonal, unimportant.

Hemingway told us, "Prose is architecture, not interior decoration. . . ." Premature correction by a teacher or an editor must focus mainly on the decoration, the cosmetics of writing. Of course, writers must spell correctly, must follow the conventions of language that make meaning clear. But the writer must do it in relation to the writer's meaning through the medium of the writer's own voice. Writing is too important to be corrected by the book; it must be corrected in relation to meaning.

When revision is encouraged, not as a punishment but as a natural process in the exploration of the text to discover meaning, then many basic writers become motivated to revise. It is a slow but miraculous process. The basic writers spot a hint of meaning that surprises them. Usually the meaning is in a primitive form at the time it is first shared with a teacher or fellow student. Basic writers are urged on. Soon they do not revise to become correct, they revise to discover their individual meaning, to hear their own voices making those meanings clear, and to hear their readers' delight as an unexpected meaning is recognized as true.

The making of meaning through revision is a logical craft. Once a student has made meaning, the process can be repeated. It is not an act of magic anymore than magic acts are; it is a matter of tuning an engine, kneading dough, sewing a dress, building a shelf. The act of revision allows the writer to take something that was not and make it something that is; it allows the writer to achieve the satisfaction of completion, closure.

Revision can be the most satisfying part of teaching composition if the teacher is willing to let go. The composition teacher must wean the student. The teacher must give the responsibility for the text to the writer, making clear again and again that it is the student, not the teacher, who decides what the writing means.

The best way for teachers to reveal exploration in revision is by writing in public on the blackboard, or by using an overhead projector, allowing the students to see how writing struggles to find what it has to say. The teacher should not consciously write badly; the teacher should write as well as possible. That will produce copy that is quite bad enough to deserve revision.

The teacher who writes in public will expose the fact that writing often does not come clear; in fact, syntax often breaks down just at the point where a new or significant meaning is beginning to break out of its shell. That meaning has an awkward and clumsy time of it, but if the writer listens carefully and nurtures the meaning, it may grow into significance. Or it may not. It may have to be put aside. But first it has to be understood before it can be rejected. Teachers who are willing to share evolving writing will find their class willing to share in a workshop where everyone is trying to help the writer discover and clarify the evolving meaning.

I have internalized a checklist that follows the logic of revision. It may be helpful to consider this checklist, but each teacher should work to develop a new checklist with each class. Neither my checklist nor anyone else's checklist should be taken as gospel. The checklist should be formulated while the class experiences the process of making meaning clear.

The principles that underlie my checklist are:

- *Build on strength.* The writer searches the text for the meaning that is being developed by the writing and looks for what is working to make it work better. Revising is not so much a matter of correction as it is a matter of discovering the strength of the text and extending that strength.
- *Cut what can be cut.* An effective piece of writing has a single dominant meaning, and everything in the text must advance that meaning.
- *Simplicity is best.* This does not mean writing in pidgin English, merely sending a telegram to the reader. It does mean making the writing as simple as it can be for what is being said. The message may be complex, and that may require linguistic or rhetorical complexity, but that complexity should always be the simplest way to communicate the complexity.
- *The writing will tell you how to write.* In revising I do not look to rule books, to models from other writers, to what I have written before, or how I have written it. The answers to the problems of this piece of writing lie in the evolving text. I have faith that if I read carefully—if I listen to my own developing voice—I will discover what I have to say.

My checklist requires at least three different kinds of reading—for focus, form and voice. This does not mean that I read the text three times; it is possible that the readings overlap and I read it only a couple of times. Most times I read it many more times. There is no ideal number of readings. I read it enough times to discover what I have to say.

During each of the readings I keep my eye and my ear on the single dominant meaning that is evolving from the text. A good piece of writing, I believe, says only one thing. Or to put it in a different way, the many things that are said in a piece of writing all add up to a single meaning. Here is my internal checklist articulated:

Focus. First I read the text as fast as possible, trying to keep my pen capped, trying to see it from a distance the way the reader will so I can ask myself the larger questions of content and meaning. I do not do this “first” reading, of course, until I have the meaning of the writing in mind. In other words, I have to have *a* focus before I can work on *the* focus. If, in each stage of the reading, the meaning does not become clearer and clearer, I go back and discover a potential meaning that can be brought into focus. The questions I ask are:

- *What does the piece of writing mean?* If it is not clear, I will take the time to write a sentence that makes the meaning clear, that achieves what Virginia Woolf calls, “the power of combination,” that contains the tensions within the piece of writing in a single statement.
- *Are all the reader’s questions answered?* Many times I will brainstorm the questions that the reader will inevitably ask of the text.
- *Is new information needed?*
- *Is the piece built on undocumented assumptions?* Sometimes I will actually write down my assumptions to see if they make sense or stand up as a firm foundation for the piece.
- *Is the genre appropriate to the meaning?* One of my novels started out as a series of articles. By genre I mean fiction, poetry, or the larger categories of non-fiction - personal narrative, familiar essay, argument, exposition.
- *Are there any tangents that can be cut loose?* I used to have much more trouble getting rid of those wonderful pieces of evidence or examples of writing that really did not relate to the meaning. Hannah Lees taught me how to solve this problem. For years I wrote one paragraph to a page, then played solitaire with these paragraphs, arranging and re-arranging them until they made a single meaning.
- *Is there a section that should be a separate piece of writing?*
- *Is each point supported by convincing evidence?* Sometimes I actually role-play a reader. It is always a specific person I know who does not

agree with me and who I believe does not like me. I want to confront my enemies and defeat them before the writing is published.

- *Is the piece long enough to satisfy the reader?* Most writers underwrite, and I am no exception. The tendency is to say it and not to give the reader enough room for the reader to discover the meaning.
- *Is the piece short enough to keep the reader involved?* The piece of writing must develop its own energy, its own momentum. If my mind wanders during this first quick reading, the reader's certainly will.

Form. Next, I read the text again, a bit more slowly, only uncapping my pen when a marginal note is necessary, trying to look at the text as a sequence of chunks of writing, perhaps chunks of meaning. I am no longer looking at the text as a whole, although I am aware of the territory now, and I am trying to keep myself free of the concern with detail, for a premature involvement with the details of language may keep me from evaluating the questions of form. The questions I ask are:

- *Is the title on target?* Years ago when I could put my own heads on editorials, I found that the effort to write a title is worth the trouble. I may draft as many as a hundred titles, for each one is a way of discovering meaning, and I can draft a number of titles in almost slivers of time. At this stage of the revision process I check to make sure that the title relates to the meaning as that meaning has now evolved.
- *Does the lead catch the reader in three seconds—or less?* I hear rumors of good pieces of writing that have poor leads or beginnings, but I have not been able to find any from professional writers. The first few lines of a piece of writing establish the tone, the voice, the direction, the pace, the meaning. I check once more to make sure that the lead will entice the reader.
- *Does the lead deliver on its contract with the reader?* The lead must be honest. It must relate to the meaning that will evolve through the text.
- *Does the piece answer the reader's questions at the point the reader will ask them?* This is the key to effective organization. Again and again I will ask the questions the reader will ask, even if they are the questions I do not want the reader to ask, and then number them in the order the reader will ask them. A good piece of writing does not need transitional phrases. The information arrives when the reader can use it. The reader's questions and their order can be anticipated.
- *How can I get out of the way of the reader and show rather than tell?* Orwell instructed writers that they should be like a pane of glass through which the reader sees the subject. I do not want the reader to be impressed with my writing; my arrogance is greater than that. I want the reader to receive the evidence in such a direct fashion that it will cause the

reader to think the way I want the reader to think. I want to show so effectively that the reader will see my meaning as inevitable.

- *Is there an effective variety of documentation?* Most of us fall into a pattern using quotations, citations, anecdotes, statistics, personal experience—whatever we feel comfortable using or whatever we think we do well. The documentation, of course, should be what works best for the point being documented.
- *Does the pace reinforce the meaning?* The reader should be allowed to absorb each point before moving on to the next one. I tend to write and to teach too intensively; I have to remember to give the reader room.
- *Does the pace provide the energy to carry the reader forward?*
- *Are the dimensions appropriate to the meaning?* The size of each section should be in proportion to other sections.
- *Does the end echo the lead and fulfill its promise?*

Voice. At last, I read the text slowly, line by line, my pen uncapped. I usually read the text many times within this category, generally working from the larger issue of voice down to paragraphs to sentences to phrases to single words. This is the most satisfying part of revision. There is a single meaning. It will change and develop and become clearer, but there is a focus, there is an order, and there is the chance to work with language, to combine my voice with the voice that is evolving from the draft. The questions I then ask are:

- *Can the piece be read aloud?* Does it sound as if one person is talking to one person? Reading is a private experience, a human contact from one single person to another single person. I think that effective writing should be conversational. Sometimes the conversation is more formal than others, but it should never be stuffy, pretentious, or incapable of being read aloud by the writer.
- *Are important pieces of specific information at the ends and beginnings of key sentences, paragraphs, sections, and the entire piece itself?* The 2-3-1 principle of emphasis can do as much as anything else to sharpen up prose and make meaning clear: the second most important point of emphasis is at the beginning; the least important piece of emphasis is at the middle, and the greatest point of emphasis is at the end.
- *Does each paragraph make one point?*
- *Does each paragraph carry a full load of meaning to the reader?*
- *Do the paragraphs vary in length in relation to meaning—the shorter the more important the information?*
- *Are the paragraphs in order?* If the reader's questions are answered when they will be asked, formal transitions will not be needed.
- *Does the reader leave each sentence with more information than the reader entered it?*

- *Are there sentences that announce what will be said or sum up what has been said and, therefore, can be cut?*
- *Are most sentences subject-verb-object sentences?* At least most sentences that carry the essence of meaning should be direct sentences. The interesting work done in sentence-combining has too often confused this issue. Of course sentences should be combined, but the strength and vigor of the language still lies in simple, direct subject-verb-object sentences. These are the sentences, short and to the point, that will communicate.
- *Are there clauses that get in the way of meaning?* Many sentences have to be reordered so that the meaning comes clear. This usually means that sentences have to be read aloud again and again until the information in the sentence appears at the moment that the reader can use it.
- *Are the verbs active and strong enough to drive the meaning forward?* The verbs are the engines of meaning, and during revision the writer must give priority to finding verbs that are accurate and provide energy.
- *Has the right word been found?* Many times we try to use two almost right words in the hope that we will trap the meaning between them. That does not work. Mark Twain said, “The difference between the right word and the almost-right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning-bug.” He was right. Revision is the search for the exactly right word.
- *Does the meaning depend on verbs and nouns, not adverbs and adjectives?* The right word is rarely an adjective or an adverb. Again, the meaning is not caught best in the crush between adjective and noun, or adverb and verb. I always feel a tiny sense of failure when I use an adjective or an adverb. I have failed to find the right noun or the right verb.
- *Is there sexist or racist language that should be changed?*
- *Can the writing be more specific?*
- *Are there unnecessary -lys, -ings, thats, and woulds that should be cut?* Each writer must develop a list of linguistic interferences with meaning. I find when I do professional ghost-editing that merely cutting the *-lys*, the *-ings*, the *thats*, the *woulds*—and yes, the unnecessary verb *be*—will make an obscure text start to come clear.
- *Is every fact checked?*
- *Is every word spelled correctly?*
- *Is there anything I can do to make the writing simple? clear? graceful? accurate? fair?*

Do I formally ask all of these questions of myself in every piece of writing I do? Of course not. These concerns are internalized, and they overlap. The process is recursive. I discover meaning by language. I work back and forth from meaning to focus to form to voice and from voice to form to focus to meaning.

The process is, however, logical. Everything on the page must reveal meaning. Every word, every space between words, is put on the page or left on the page because it develops the meaning of the piece of writing.

This checklist cannot be dumped on the beginning or the remedial writer, but it can be used by the teacher to establish priorities. The student has to learn that writing is a search for meaning, and once a potential meaning is found, it may be clarified through the process of revision.

There is a simple guiding logic to revision, and every question of spelling, usage, structure, mechanics, style, content, documentation, voice, pace, development, must be answered in terms of meaning.

Think of a workman who moves in close, measuring, marking, sawing, fitting, standing back to examine the job, moving back in close to plane, chisel, mark and fit, standing back again to study the task, moving in close to nail the piece in place, stepping back for another look, moving in close to set the nails, another step back, another look, then in close to hide the nail holes, to sand, stepping back to make sure the sanding is complete, then in close at last to apply the finish.

Actually the workman probably moved in close many more times before finishing the task and certainly stepped back many times to see the job entire. And so does the writer, working between word and meaning.

What the student can discover is that this process is logical; it can be understood. An effective piece of writing is produced by a craft. It is simply a matter of working back and forth between focus, form, and voice until the meaning is discovered and made clear.