



PLAYING WITH REVISION

You need to get some writing down on paper and to keep it there long enough so that you can give yourself the treat of rewriting. What you need is a ballpoint pen so that you can't erase and some cheap paper so you can deliberately use a lot of it . . . Where are your notes to yourself? Where are your lists? . . . Where are your quoted passages? Where is your chaos? Nothing comes of nothing! –Ann Berthoff, “Recognition Representation and Revision”

Revision is the time when you are free to play with language, experiment with form and voice, and explore your ideas and memories more deeply. The following prompts were developed by [Michelle Cox](#) of Cornell University and [Katherine E. Tirabassi](#) of Keene State College to help guide you in revision, providing multiple ideas for further developing content, organization, and style.

The prompts listed under “Developing the Meaning” and “Style and Eloquence” are useful when revising a wide range of texts, from researched essays, to letters to the editor, to creative non-fiction. You may find the prompts listed under “Playing with Time” and “Layering in the Details” most useful when revising works of creative nonfiction.

Developing the Meaning

1. **Finding the Focus:** Does your essay feel unwieldy, scattered? Read through the essay and circle the part that most clearly zones in on what you want to write about or hints at an insight you experienced while writing. In the rest of the piece, underline the phrases that need to be in the next draft. Now, rewrite, starting as close to the circled part as you can, and ending soon after the circled part ends. You may find that this new writing leads to a whole new draft, or you may choose to incorporate this writing into your existing draft.
2. **Do You Really Mean It?** Revision gives the opportunity to reflect on and further develop your ideas. Read over your draft, and ask yourself if you still believe or agree with everything you wrote. Write reflective notes in the margins as you read, and then revise, while referring to these notes.
3. **Talk about Your Writing:** Ask someone to read your writing who is willing to talk with you seriously about what you've written. During this conversation, note what your reader asks questions about, finds interesting, wants to know more about. When you revise, picture this reader as your audience.
4. **Looping:** Look through your draft and identify a line that calls out to you, one that seems to hold meaning. Take out a new piece of paper, copy this line at the top, and freewrite from it, pushing to further develop meaning as you go. Look over this new writing, identify another line that calls out to you, and repeat the process.

Style and Eloquence

5. **Activate Your Verbs:** There are going to be situations when passive voice is preferable, such as when you are writing for scientific audiences or in cases when you want to deemphasize the subject. However, active verbs are often more direct than passive verbs. A test you can use to distinguish between active and passive voice is to see try adding a “by . . .” phrase to the

sentence. If you can add a “by . . .” phrase, the sentence uses passive voice. For example: Active: *Karen made the cookies.* Passive: *The cookies were made by Karen.* The second example is passive, because a “by . . .” phrase is added: *The cookies were made by Karen.* One more tip: Using too many “ing” verbs can slow down the pace of your prose. For example, instead of *I was running,* use *I ran.* Save “ing” verbs for times when you want to slow the action in a scene, such as describing the moment before an accident occurred or watching a leaf falling to the ground.

6. **Cut, Cut, Cut:** Comb through your essay and cut as much as you possibly can. Try for fifteen words per page. Cut extra words that don’t add meaning, such as “really,” “very,” “basically,” “thing,” “it,” “it was,” “it is,” “there were,” “there is,” “this is,” and “that.” Example: *My brother’s constant whining is one of those many characteristics that really frustrates me to no end* can be cut to *My brother’s constant whining frustrates me.* Cut wordy phrases that don’t add meaning, such as *on the other hand, due to the fact that, needless to say, in my personal opinion, at this point in time.* Cut redundant words, such as “big tall skyscraper.” The words “big” and “tall” have similar meanings, and using the specific word “skyscraper” tells your reader that the building you’re referring to is a large building.
7. **Sentence Variety:** Readers appreciate a change of pace, and varying sentence lengths and structure can add that sense of texture to your writing, and help you better emphasize key pieces of information. Comb through your draft and focus in on your sentences. Count the number of words in each sentence. How many sentences are the same length? Look at the structure of your sentences. How many include introductory phrases, conjunctions, or dependant clauses? Read your essay out loud, listening to the rhythm, noting places where you stumble over a word or strive to emphasize something that’s not being emphasized by the writing. Then revise, using short sentences for emphasis, long sentences for depth and description, moving important pieces of information to the ends of sentences for added emphasis.
8. **Focusing on Pronouns:** Here are some strategies for tightening your writing in relation to pronoun use: Comb through your draft and circle all instances of “it.” The phrase “it is” at the beginning of a sentence (*It is a quiet, gentle rain*) can be used for emphasis, but overuse waters down this emphasis. Other uses of “it” can make writing sound vague. “There” at the beginning of the sentence can have the same effect. Try replacing “it” and “there” with more specific words. Now circle all uses of the words “this” and “these.” Many times, when “this” or “these” is not followed by the word the pronoun is referring to, the writing can sound vague and foggy (e.g., *This is long and cumbersome* versus *This sentence is long and cumbersome*). Then, circle all uses of he, she, you, we, they, etc. Make sure each pronoun has a clear referent, a particular person that the pronoun refers to.

Playing with Time

9. **Flashback:** Narratives don’t need to follow a strict timeline starting at the beginning and detailing each chronological event to the end. In fact, doing so can drag out your story, compelling you to include details and events that are not essential to your main point. Try mixing it up by using a strategy like flashback, which allows you to move back and forth in time and only include the details and events that are significant. One thing to watch out for: make sure you make the shift in time clear to your reader, using signals such as changes in verb tense (present tense to past tense), white space surrounding the flashback, and the return to specific details that ground the reader in the framing story.
10. **Time Stretch:** Psychological time operates very differently from clock time. Sometimes an incident that only took a few minutes holds a great deal of significance. Look for an incident like

this in your narrative, and write a page or more about it. Recall those few minutes in detail. Replay them in slow motion. Try to use at least three of the five senses.

11. **Time Summary:** Time summaries are useful when you want to indicate to the reader quickly that a long period of time has passed or to indicate the repetition and similarity of events, such as when you want to describe a typical day at the office or what usually happens at family reunions. To use this technique, compress a long period of time into a paragraph. Let readers know the length of time you are summarizing. Words like “often,” “frequently,” “always,” “usually,” “again and again,” “sometimes,” and especially “would” suggest that actions are repeated. Here’s an example of a time summary: *Summers at the Cape always started like this. The long wait to cross the Bourne Bridge, while my sister and I talked about all that we would do that summer in Sandwich. The thrill of unlocking the cottage door and running through the rooms, making sure nothing had changed. The rush of visiting our favorite haunts again—the Boardwalk, Pizzas by Evan, Mary’s Bookstore. But then reality would set in Monday morning when Dad left to work in Worcester for the week, and we’d remember the long weeks of boredom, without Dad, without familiar neighbors, without friends from school.*

Layering in the Details

12. **Describe a Person:** Choose a person relevant to your essay’s focus and describe all physical features, dress, smell, mannerisms, how he/she talks, how he/she interacts with people, so that your reader would be able to identify this person in a crowded room.
13. **Describe a Place:** Fully describe a specific location relevant to your essay’s focus. Describe everything you see, smell, hear, taste, feel. Bring the reader right into your experience of this place.
14. **Describe an Object:** Choose a significant object that you mention in your essay, and fully describe it, referring to all of your senses. For example, if you mention a journal, show the cracks in the journal binding, the frayed edges of the fabric, the way your handwriting looks messy and excited at some places, and relaxed and contemplative in other places.
15. **Take Another Look:** Return to a place or dig out an object that you mention in your essay. Write about new details that you notice or new memories that arise.
16. **Talk to Someone Who Knows:** Informally interview a person who is important to the events you discuss in one of your pieces. Ask this person questions to fill gaps in your memory. Insert what you learn into your essay.
17. **Unbury a Story:** Find a line in your essay that seems to hide a story, and unbury that story. You might find a line that “tells” but doesn’t “show.” Open up that story. Belief statements, such as “I can’t write,” often hold one or more stories within them. Choose one of these stories to tell.
18. **Add, Add, Add:** Comb through your essay and add details that help your audience better understand what you see and mean when you use certain words. Change vague nouns (*car*) to specific nouns (*Nissan Quest*), general adjectives (*red*) to specific ones (*metallic cherry*), direct statements (*my minivan handles well*) to metaphors (*When shifting across three lanes to get to my exit, my minivan handles like what I imagine a racecar to feel like, hugging the road while cleanly gliding to the next lane, and responding quickly to my every move*).

Prompts #5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11 are inspired by Rebecca Rule and Susan Wheeler’s *True Stories: Guides for Writing from Your Life*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000.