How do I (really) revise my writing?

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In my experience, writing studies—both as a field of inquiry and a practice—has a tendency to be full of commonplaces that are largely intuitive and appear to make a lot of sense, especially at a theoretical level. When we hear quips like "Writing is a social activity," for example, it's perhaps easy to shrug and think, *well of course it is*. However, when we try to put those abstract ideas into practice, things tend to get a little…stickier, less intuitive, more difficult to actually live out. One of those commonplaces that I find particularly troublesome to enact is the idea that revision is core aspect of writing, or: all writing is rewriting.

As a writer, I know that what I am doing is process-oriented and that words and even ideas that initially come out on the page are likely not the same ones that will end up making it through to publication. Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* always still sits dutifully beside me on my desk when I write, her advice bringing me at least some level of comfort as I struggle to get words, any words at all, onto the page, "[W]riting is not rapturous. In fact, the only way I can get anything written at all is to write really, really shitty first drafts" (22). *Okay*, I reassure myself, *a shitty first draft is definitely doable*. And then, because (again), writing is a social activity, the next step to be able to get beyond that initial draft is to solicit feedback on my writing.

In my classroom, this takes the form of peer response activities; in my publishing life it manifests as the peer review process. So, I get feedback on my writing, but then what? A host of research in writing studies speaks to the importance of revising writing in light of peer commentary; but bringing this well-substantiated theory into practice is often more difficult than it initially appears for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that writing is also-always an act of identity, a merging of text and self. And seeing beyond one's self in order to incorporate the socialness of writing takes an act of intentionality, one that I didn't learn about until later in my writing career.

One of the most important things about writing that I wish I had known about sooner is how to make reviewer feedback actionable—how, practically, to take the socialness of writing and put it to use so as to actually re/vision my writing. I doubt that I am alone when I say that almost never is it the case that I submit a piece of text for publication that is accepted as is; the outcome I always aim for, then, is *revise and resubmit*. (And if you find yourself with just such a decision from a journal you should take a moment to celebrate!) But then I'm still confronted with the problem of how to *use* the feedback I get from reviewers. The request to "substantially revise" can feel daunting at best, and the most productive way I've learned to tackle this writing-for-publication imperative was taught to me by one of mentors, Dr. Kendall Gerdes (who, in turn, was adapting advice

about revising from Tonya Golash-Boza), and I'm grateful to be able to pass it on here: the revision plan.

< Insert Manuscript Title>			
Words of Affirmation: I like to write encouraging words from both reviewers to serve as a reminder of the promise of the manuscript—of the good things happening already in the text.			
Reviewer One Overview: Here I broadly synthesize and paraphrase Reviewer One's feedback. This helps me conceptualize the larger picture of how the manuscript was received by this reviewer as well as some of the more general revision requests.			
Reviewer Comment: In this cell, copy down (word-for-word) just *one* of the revision requests from Reviewer One. Be specific here! This might be something like "Update literature review" or "Refocus conclusions," etc.	**Initial Thoughts:** This is your space to begin thinking through, or "talking to," the reviewer comment in the column to the left. This cell is iterative and a place to begin responding to this specific revision request.	**In-text Revisions:** As you begin to rewrite and address this reviewer comment in your manuscript, copy and paste your revisions here, including the new page numbers. This will help you keep track of the changes you make *and* it will help you write the revision memo once you are done revising.	**Completed:** All you have to do here is check off if this revision is complete. This will help you visualize your progress. *Or,* if you choose *not* to revise based on this particular reviewer request, you can explain *why* you chose not to revise.
Reviewer Comment: Repeat the above row as many times as needed for Reviewer One.	**Initial Thoughts:**	**In-text Revisions:**	**Completed:**
Reviewer Two Overview: Repeat the above process, but this time provide an overview of Reviewer Two's feedback.			
Reviewer Comment: Repeat the process for Reviewer Two as many times as needed.	**Initial Thoughts:**	**In-text Revisions:**	**Completed:**

Table 1: A revision plan template that writers can use to organize reviewers' or instructors' feedback to their writing.

Admittedly, this idea might not seem revolutionary. It might even appear downright mundane and boring. After all, who actually gets excited about a spreadsheet? But the revision plan has become a standard practice in my writing process that, more than anything else, has improved my ability to think and work through the complexities of what it means—what it *really* means—to revise my writing. The basic premise of the revision plan is simple: organize and break down reviewer feedback into identifiable, manageable, and *actionable* items. This way a one- or two-page peer reviewer report (or even feedback from an instructor) that, at first, seems like a mountain of revision requests shifts into a more easily navigable set of action items for you, the writer, to consider. Remember: you don't always *have* to make the changes that reviewers suggest. But what you do need to be able to do is articulate your reasons *why* you're not attending to those suggestions. Revising, and writing more generally, is about understanding and making choices. Moreover, a revision plan is transformative because it concretizes and makes real how writing is a social activity as well as how all writing is rewriting.

References

Lamott, Anne. (1994). *Bird by bird: Some instructions on writing and life.* Anchor Books.