

REVISE from your improvisational mind

Prepare to open yourself up to impulses—and new visions of your material



By Andy Couturier

WHY ARE WE SO stuck about this revising thing? Do we think that the only way to do it is to riddle ourselves with recriminations?

First off: Let's see revision as a kind of vision. When you started your piece, you felt something, and then you wrote a stab at it. And now you check those words and phrases against your original feeling. Are they in sync with what you were reaching to say? You try to describe this world we live in, and the language pushes back, the reality of the world pushes back. The lack of fit is a gift. In revising, you align yourself more and more with what you feel to be true. You discover your own life by adding to and changing and working a freewrite.

And here's some reassurance: There is someone out there helping you write. This person is your own self. Your future self. Revision is a collaboration with self over time. Because this other person is helping you, you can trust yourself in freewriting.

The first trick of revision is to start with addition. (There are only four operations in revising: addition, subtraction, substitution and resequencing.) Feel a sense of plenty by writing a lot. Plenty is good because it allows freedom in the future. For one, if you have to cut, you can cut from a place of abun-

dance, instead of trying to drag one microfilament of good writing at a time out of your tiny little text until you get enough, a hairpin here and a potato chip there. There are lots of ways to subtract and resequence from the intuitive mind, but in this brief adaptation from my book *Writing Open the Mind*, we will focus on "add."

Breaking the Art Museum Rule

Here's the beleaguered writer: "The problem with this piece of writing is that ... nnnngghh! I'm so *frustrated!*" Here are some varieties of this: "I want to tell about abandoning atheism without sounding hokey." Or, "Does the

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monkey die in the end?" Or, "If I reveal that much about Sarah, people are going to think it's about me (which it partly is, but in some ways not)."

All these are varieties of "nnngghh!" You are thinking all these things *about* what you are writing, but someone inside is telling you, "You can't actually *write* those questions in the report/novel/poem."

Hey, that's just like in the art museum! On the little plaque next to the

painting, you can write "Acrylic on canvas" but not: "My mommy died." You cannot write, "The threads across the chicken wire represent how my boyfriend is a jerk, and the splatterings of red paint represent the outsourcing of holiness to India." That's called "explaining the artwork," and the first thing you learn in art school is, "That is so wrong."

Well, for this technique, I'm going to suggest that you just say what you feel about the writing *in* the writing. Write the questions you have about this piece, or why you are frustrated with it, or what you are trying to accomplish, and put that down on the page.

Because breaking the Art Museum Rule is about saying "Yes" to impulses. Impulses originate in the owl-filled night. When we say "No" to an impulse, the flow stops. Game over. Then we get all jammed up. But when you revise from the improvisational mind, you have to submit to the transformatory power of going for it. Let the keystrokes fall where they may.

Try explaining. Try "tell, don't show." Write, "The reason I'm doing this is ____." Write down whatever you're not allowed to say. And try it more than once. For example: "I'm trying to make revision sound as intriguing as I know it can be without having the readers fight me too much." Say that. Don't sit there neurotically thinking about "the problem" forever and ever. Unload it on the page and move forward. Because you don't know what's behind those thoughts. What's

behind is what's interesting. Trust me.

And sometimes while you were screeching it all down, your pen utters one little word, which miraculously turns out to be just the word the whole bloomin' piece of writing hinges on. It's the fulcrum! By George, the very pivot!

Remember, the universe has a lot of things going on that we don't know about. Maybe this piece of writing has another destination. Maybe *you* do. Say yes to what is trying to come through you and you just may find out what your writing is trying to do.

Tuning Fork

Have you ever written something you're really happy with? "Yes, this sounds like me, and it is good," you say. You've probably wished you could do that more often. The good news is that the same resonating frequency is still in the background Geiger count of the patterns of words that came out that day.

The way to get access to that precise place of mind that wrote it is in steps, increments. For all writing emerges from that tiny instant of feeling impelled to say "the next thing," and to say it in a way that matches the interior sense you have for your piece. With Tuning Fork, (adapted from an idea of theater director Richard Seyd), you re-create a physical pattern in the mind's ear, and let that sensibility move forward on its own.

So first choose the piece you want to revise and jot down a few key phrases from it at the top of a blank page, and put it aside. (Note: This technique takes a few minutes of prep at the outset.) Next, take the golden passage, even one paragraph will do, and read it five or six times. Try to hear it deeply. Then, using some index cards, take each phrase, each subphrase, the smallest meaningful bit (two words or four) and copy them onto the cards, one for each card.

Now stack up the cards and read them through several more times. Then, with a piece of scrap paper by your side, read the first one out loud. And then, without looking at the next card, write down what you think the next phrase is, as close as you can get. (Caution: Tuning Fork is not about memorizing, or guessing correctly or getting it right for the exam. You don't want to clench.)

Now read that second card and notice the difference between what you thought it would be and what it actually was. Reflect for just a second: "Huh. That's interesting. Why did my right-now mind write 'at the church,' but when I was in that golden space of mind I wrote 'of the church'?"

Don't overanalyze, and don't berate yourself. Just reflect for a second, and go back and read card one and card two aloud, then write what you think

LET WHATEVER come out. See what happens when you tune to that muse.

is on card three. "Mistakes" are good: The part you *want* is the discrepancy. Keep going. It usually doesn't kick in for at least eight to 10 cards. Get to the end, or to a place where you sense, "I feel it." Then go directly to your blank page with the key words at the top and write freely on your originally chosen topic or story, no stopping, hearing that music, and let *whatever* come out. See what happens. (Note: You can also try Tuning Fork with the words of Henry James or Marianne Moore or your writing-group friend.)

The gateway of dissonance

So often the act of revising is a search for dissonance—the part that doesn't fit. It's the jarring, the confounding, the "error": You strike the page with angry red gashes. And that's why revising is hard, right? Because it's like slapping your own wrist with a ruler.

Well, that's true in its own complex and irresolvable way, but the best advice there is simple generosity. Just be kind to your reader. Go through your work and smooth out its mean and selfish edges. Don't be mean to yourself, just think about delighting a single sweet reader that you care about.

Yet in the great search for dissonance, there's a gateway to your own mind that you are gonna be happy to know. Here's an example: Say you are

great at Frisbee. You can do all kinds of fancy catches and tips and taps. And let's also say you can play the harmonica like nobody's business. Even a train gets jealous of your rhythm. And then let's also say that you've taken up stilt walking and you're getting good. Really good. So one day you decide to try to do all of them at the same time. You're a stilt-walking, Frisbee-spinning harmonica sensation. Except every once in a while you play a dissonant note. It's cognitive overload from doing too much.

And that's what happens sometimes when you are writing. Reading it back, you come upon a sentence that is syntactically frazzled. You could, of course, just fix it, and most of the time that's just what you'd do. But sometimes you might want to look a little bit closer. Perhaps when you were crafting that sentence you were in a situation of cognitive overload. You were feeling a complexity of different ideas, and also trying to choose words and phrases and move on to the next. In the hubbub, the mind prioritized the important stuff, and the syntax got tangled. So the word-order fumbles indicate you were reaching for something beyond what you know. You may have been in a bit over your head. But that's good. That's where your writing can grow. And that's where your writing can cause *you* to grow.

So copy out that little stumbly sentence at the top of a new page and free-write on that. Use those same words, but don't just rewrite the sentence; keep delving into the parts lying underneath it, the parts not said, or almost said, delving into what was trying to get out.

Dissonant phraseology tells you about your mind at the moment of conception; it's a gateway to something you are trying to know. The red "Awk!" in the margin is the last thing you need.

Andy Couturier

A writing teacher based in Oakland, Calif., Andy Couturier is author of *Writing Open the Mind* and leads writing journeys in rural Japan. His next book will be *A Different Kind of Luxury: Glimpses of the Good Life from Rural Japan*. Web: www.theopening.org.

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