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 abundance, 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 ... nnngghhh! I’m so frustrated!” Here are some varieties of this: “I want to tell about abandoning atheism without sounding hokey.” Or, “Does the 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 “nnngghhh!” You are thinking all these things 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
screeding 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 pat-
terns 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 direc-
tor Richard Seyd), you re-create a phys-
cal 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 free
write 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 guess-
ing 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, hear-
ing 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 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 disso-
nance, 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 jeal-
ous 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 syn-
tactically 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 cog-
nitive overload. You were feeling a com-
plexity 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 writ-
ing can grow. And that’s where your
writing can cause you to grow.
So copy out that little stumbly sen-
tence 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 con-
ception; it’s a gateway to something you
are trying to know. The red “Awk!” in
the margin is the last thing you need.

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