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“Good Enough”

Teaching Confidence through Revision

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between a student’s writing and their response to criticism. Many students respond negatively to revision suggestions when they have already finished their paper. However, revision is a vital part of all writings and must be included in the writing process. Criticizing a student’s essay can often cause the student to feel personally insulted. In order for them to revisit and edit something they’ve written, tutors must encourage them and remind them of the things they did well before pointing out mistakes. This will cause the student to remain self-affirmed, confident, and ready to change their writing into something better.

*Key Words:* Revision, Writing Process, Tutor, Confidence, Teaching

## Good Enough: Teaching Confidence Through Revision

Upon beginning work at the writing center, a student came in during my second week of the job. He thrust his paper onto the desk in front of us, barely glancing at me, and proclaimed, “This essay is already finished. I’m only here because my professor made me come.”

However, upon reading through his essay I found many errors, including the lack of a thesis statement. I walked him through the concepts of good writing and the organization of a good argument. We discussed the importance of stating a thesis and how it ties into the rest of the essay. He listened, agreed with me, then shrugged. “I already turned it in. At this point, I’m done with it,” he said. I admit to a great deal of frustration. I knew the truth: the essay *wasn’t* finished.

We have all been there.

Students bring in their first drafts and tell us that they are complete. Their eyes shine with words like “*Of course there is constant room for improvement, but I’ve done the hard work and that’s all I’m going to do. It’s never going to be perfect.*” These students suffer from a serious misunderstanding of the writing process itself and early closure on their papers is hurting their writing skills in the long-term, regardless of the grade they will receive. However, if a tutor begins to explain this the students will often close themselves off as they begin to believe they are finished with their work. Addressing this divide between the first and final draft through revision is a vital part of any tutoring experience.

Revision is one of the most important parts of the writing process. It has been proved again and again that almost no one starts an essay with an exact idea of what they’re going to write about (Gulya 563). The process of rereading and revising can catch the differences between what a writer thought at the beginning of the paper versus what they thought at the end. In

addition, revision is the only way to address the “complex composition problems” that students tend to avoid on a first draft. Studies suggest that the only way students can learn to realize and address these problems is to deal with them themselves rather than through direct instruction (Keen 373). As writing tutors, it is our responsibility to ensure that these students leave not only with the knowledge needed to revise their paper, but also with the skills and strategies to write better papers in the future.

When a student holds their writing in high esteem, the potential sting of embarrassment revision brings can hold them back. In order to revise, a student must take an active role in admitting that what they originally wrote was not good enough. Because writing has a “close relationship to thinking,” (Gulya 565) it is often our first instinct to guard our writings closely to protect our sense of self-worth (Correll et. al 350). Through writing, students express the important ideas that they have produced through thought, research, and effort. They have taken a concept and made it their own and by the time the first draft is done they have put a lot of themselves into the essay, leaving little room for input. If a tutor suggests an edit that the student feels strongly about, they may not listen because of this conflict.

However, it is often the case that students fail to see the importance of their own writing and the revision that is necessary. Students rarely do anything they don't see the necessity of doing. Studies have found that most people will not change their minds on a topic unless they find the topic to be of importance in the first place (Correll et. al 356). A passing grade – especially for a student that has “put in the hard work” already – will often be enough for them, especially if they hold little esteem on the essay itself. How can we convince students that their writing is valuable and deserves to be revised?

Positive reinforcement is, perhaps, the first step towards revision. In order to convince a student of their own writing's importance, it is vital to first tell them what they did correctly. By stating exactly what parts of a student's writing is effective, students may begin to see that they, too, can be "important members of a writing community" (Mazura et. al 83). In addition, this may foster more trust between the tutor and the tutee (Mazura et. al 84). If a student doesn't trust their tutor, they won't listen to them. It is important to remind students that as peer tutors, we are on their side, rooting for them. The only way this can be correctly achieved is by first affirming that they are good writers and that they can become great writers with revision.

Next, it is important to walk through the revision process with them. By doing this, students may begin to see what their work could potentially become. When a student comes in with a rough draft it is a perfect opportunity to have them read, correct, and reread. Students who learn this writing process instead of simply correcting specific mistakes often end up being better, more comprehensive writers (Keen 376). While it is important to point out specific concerns and give feedback, students must correct these themselves with tutors teaching them how to do it along the way (Mazura et. al 84). Tutors who fix problems without the student's input risk the student putting up defenses to protect their writing. However, self-affirmation can help keep students from feeling attacked by opposing views (Correll et. al 356). By doing the revision themselves, students will keep this self-affirmed attitude, remain confident in their own abilities, and won't be worried about the threats of an outside opinion.

I went through many of these steps with the student that came in that day, offering compliments and advice. At the end of the tutoring session I turned to the student and asked him if he would improve his essay based on what we talked about. He said no. I accepted this – there is nothing we can do to force someone to continue writing after they are done. So instead, I asked

him, “Well, will you at least keep in the mind the things we’ve talked about for your future writing?”

“Sure,” he said. He may have been placating me but as he gathered his things, I had the distinct impression that I had at least taught him something. We cannot be responsible for the papers our students turn in, but we are in some ways responsible for how much knowledge they leave our tutoring centers with.

Students who come in with prematurely finished essays must be taught the proper way to revise with kindness and respect. Revision is an important part of any student’s education and while it may be difficult to get past the student’s barriers, it will make them better writers in the end. Throughout a session, tutors should keep in mind that “attitudes can serve as bases of self-worth, and ... the individual will often strive to protect them” (Correll et. al 356). Perhaps one of the most vital roles of tutors is to, along with the student, strive to protect this self-worth. If we as tutors can lift up and encourage our students instead of breaking them down, then those students will go out into the world self-affirmed, confident, and ready to tackle whatever writing challenges lay ahead.

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