
Revision Think Sheets: Supporting Writers from Draft to Final Copy

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Picture this: I am sitting at my dining room table with two stacks of research paper drafts serving as armrests. Under my right arm is a pile of student papers referred to as “best second drafts” written by juniors in my writing-intensive Teachers as Leaders course. These are expected to be students’ latest attempts to revise first drafts of their research papers using revision suggestions I made on their “best first drafts” (that pile of papers under my left arm).

I am reading paper number six, and so far I do not discern any substantial revision work between best first draft #1 and #2. I can document my intuition about the lack of revision by comparing the two papers a student has submitted. I can see that I have written on Hannah’s “best first draft,” for example, the advice to discuss why many parents and teachers are opposed to drug therapy to treat children with ADHD. Hannah’s “best second draft” shows no evidence of attention to this suggestion to develop the complexity of the ADHD issue. Instead, she has copyedited this second draft to clean up the surface errors and resubmitted her work.

Nola’s paper is similarly lacking in revision. On her “best first draft,” I reminded her that one requirement for the research paper is a concluding section that offers the writer’s own opinion about the issue addressed in her “hot topics in Education”

paper. Nola's first draft does not include her stance on merit pay for teachers, nor does her second draft. All her paragraphs, though, are now indented and her bibliography is in APA format.

One of the most challenging and often exasperating results of responding to student writing is students' inconsistent use of my feedback during revision. My professional background in writing theory and pedagogy, as a co-director of a National Writing Project site, as a language arts teacher, and as a writer myself, has taught me the importance of feedback. I know how vital meaningful comments can be in nudging the revision process by helping writers address unanswered questions, flawed logic, or lack of clarity in their drafts.

And yet, in my current role as an Education professor, I have found that my students do not always engage with my feedback in significant ways. I am often disappointed to receive final drafts that look much like the rough drafts I have read and commented on. Frustration inevitably follows when I think that the time I spent responding to students' papers was wasted.

I wasn't sure why most writers appeared to ignore my revision suggestions, but I had some suspicions. First, I wondered if students were used to the kind of thorough feedback I provided. As a former language arts teacher in grades five through eight, and then a college-level instructor in Education courses when I was a doctoral student, I had twelve years of experience learning about and providing feedback that motivates writers to want to return to their writing. Then, as now, I focused on providing revision suggestions rather than editing services. So, while I was confident in my skills as a reader-responder, I did not know enough about my student writers at this new college where I was teaching to feel confident in their experience with incorporating feedback into a final draft. What kind of feedback had they encountered in their past writing projects? Was the feedback mostly copyediting, content suggestions, or a balance of both?

Second, I wondered how often students were offered the opportunity to hand in drafts for feedback before their final copy was due. As an instructor of college students who ostensibly have a long history of writing instruction, I am frequently sur-

prised by students' confusion about—and sometimes belligerence toward--draft deadlines. In my courses, I am compelled to be explicit about defining what a draft is compared to a final product, and then I often have to justify my decision to require a draft because many students are dismayed by the prospect of having to write something twice.¹

As I thought about how to require more accountability from my students in the way they used my feedback in subsequent drafts, I returned to a seminal article by Nancy Sommers titled *Responding to Student Writing* (1982). The article describes her exploration of how college professors respond to student writing and what students do with those responses. In re-reading her study, I found a quote that captures the synergy between high-quality feedback from teachers and improved revision from students. Sommers writes,

The challenge we face as teachers is to develop comments which will provide an inherent reason for students to revise; it is a sense of revision as discovery, as a repeated process of beginning again, as starting out new, that our students have not learned. We need to show our students how to seek, in the possibility of revision, the dissonance of discovery—to show them through our comments why new choices would positively change their texts, and thus to show them the potential for development implicit in their own writing (p. 156).

Armed with this quote, and some concerns about students' experience with and dispositions toward using feedback on draft writing to tackle the revision process, I decided to establish more definitive expectations for students' response to my feedback on their writing. I designed a "think sheet" for students to use as a way to interpret my feedback on their drafts, to make plans to apply the feedback, and to provide evidence that they acted on these plans. The template is attached to this article. Here is how it works.

When students turn in a draft of their writing, I return the piece with my comments and a blank copy of the "Revision Think Sheet." Students are then expected to re-read their drafts,

taking into consideration the marginal comments I have provided. After revisiting their draft, and my response to it, students complete the first part of the think sheet by explaining how they interpreted several of my revision suggestions. I leave space for five interpretations, although depending on the length of the draft, students may not have that much feedback to contemplate. I also ask students to indicate whether the comment they are interpreting is focused on the content of their ideas or the form in which they expressed themselves. At this point in the think sheet process, students are not required to actually make revision in their writing. They simply focus on my feedback, then write short notes describing the advice they think I have offered.

Revisiting Hannah's paper described in the introduction of this article provides a useful example of this first stage of the revision think sheet process. Had Hannah used a think sheet, she might have taken my comment about addressing resistance to drug therapy for children with ADHD, and written in one of the five spaces provided, "*You suggested that I write about why some people think drug therapy for ADHD is a bad idea. This feedback is focused on the content of my writing.*"

Once they have completed Part 1 of the Revision Think Sheet, students hand it in for me to check. If I think anyone has misunderstood my comments, I have an opportunity to talk with her before she begins rewriting to help clarify my original comment. For instance, if Hannah's interpretation of my feedback was off-base, if she had written, "*You suggested I write more about drug therapy for children with ADHD,*" I would step in to show her that she misinterpreted my suggestion.

Also, if a student appears to have focused entirely on my editing suggestions, rather than the more complex work of rethinking or reorganizing the content of sections of her writing, I urge the writer to revisit my feedback.²

When my students and I have had a satisfactory exchange of ideas based on Phase 1 of the Revision Think Sheet, a process that takes place over a week's time in a course that meets twice a week, we move into Phase 2. At this stage, which takes two weeks, students complete revisions of their draft writing and then

use the second half of the think sheet to indicate which revision suggestions they incorporated in their final draft. By requiring students to be accountable for incorporating my feedback into their writing, I hope to help them recognize Sommers' vision of the power of high-quality feedback; that is, that "through our comments," students might understand "why new choices would positively change their texts, and thus to show them the potential for development implicit in their own writing" (p. 156).

While the Revision Think Sheet has the potential to be too prescriptive, I guard against this outcome by using it as a tool to talk about ownership. Before heading into Phase 2, I talk with my students about the writer's prerogative to pick and choose which revision suggestions to accept and fold into their subsequent drafts. Even the most well-intentioned readers, who provide feedback that shows genuine engagement with a writer's draft, do not always provide advice that a writer wants to consider. I remind my students that writers have the right to select the feedback they think will move their writing forward most productively. In fact, making these kinds of discriminating decisions suggests a writer, herself, is invested in her ideas—an outcome that is too nuanced to formally evaluate, but that signals the most significant progress a student makes in becoming a writer.

Last fall, a new crop of students in Teachers as Leaders utilized the revision think sheet approach to document the results of interpreting and then using feedback to revise a major research paper. With this first experiment using the think sheet, I took extra time at the Phase 1 stage to be sure students understood the intent of the template. Using what I called "Invited Office Hours," students signed up for a fifteen-minute conference with me to discuss their work on Phase 1. A majority of students interpreted my feedback accurately and indicated a mix of content and form comments that were most likely to influence their final drafts.

Several students—those who demonstrated a greater need for support throughout the process of planning and writing their first drafts—were less successful using the template. Two things were common with these struggling writers: First, they

overemphasized editing suggestions when interpreting my feedback on their drafts. Second, even when redirected to consider my comments about reworking the content of their writing, my developing writers had difficulty conceptualizing how to take feedback that was less directive and letting it guide their subsequent drafts.

For example, if I indicated in my feedback that the writer needed to use APA style formatting throughout her work when citing references, she included on her think sheet: “Look up APA style and use for all citations.” No problem there. If, however, I wrote on her draft, “You need to synthesize the five studies you cited about cooperative learning, rather than summarizing each one and leaving out the connections among them”, my less skilled writers often excluded this advice from their “re-interpretation.” When pressed to think about streamlining their writing by comparing and contrasting the key ideas in research they read, these students were often resistant, explaining that the articles they summarized were all different and needed to be summarized for readers.

From these kinds of conversations, I can easily identify the intervention a writer needs to move forward with her craft. I often turn to Graff and Birkenstein’s (2006) book, *They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*, to find templates that help students address the more complex stages of revising. In the case cited above, the writer would profit from a short tutorial in words or phrases that prompt synthesis. Graff and Birkenstein suggest sentences such as, “On the one hand, _____ argues _____. On the other hand, _____ contends _____” (p. 24). Equipped with the skeleton of language that supports a well-written synthesis, my writers are guided to look at their research in more sophisticated ways. As a result, their revision process benefits.

By the end of the semester, students’ final drafts showed evidence of attention to revision suggestions. Phase 2 of the Revision Think Sheet forced the issue of incorporating feedback by asking writers to name the specific changes they made based on draft comments. When I started the process of evaluating stu-

dents' papers, I began by consulting phase 2 of the Think Sheet for each writer's submission, noting in particular the places where she made particular changes based on her interpretation of my feedback. Students' final grades on the research paper were based on points earned for different stages of writing, including points for completing each phase of the Revision Think Sheet. Although the real value of the template was intended to be reflected in the higher quality writing in a student's final paper, I was comfortable assigning a point value to the process of completing the think sheet to emphasize its use in planning for revision.

Without oversimplifying the many writing obstacles less successful students face, I suggest that most writers' struggles arise from a lack of composing experience, rather than a lack of ability. Complaining with colleagues about students' lack of writing ability at a department meeting, or blazing into class after reading lackluster drafts to provide triage for the most painful aspects of students' writing—these rituals provide temporary relief for the frustration we often feel as teachers, but offer no lasting impact for our students. If we want to help writers at that crucial stage of converting a draft to a final paper, we need to devise systems of support that illuminate the connection between feedback and rewriting. The Revision Think Sheet is one tool to, as Sommers reminds us, “show [students] the potential for development implicit in their own writing” (p. 156).

Notes

1. This is when I pull out Elizabeth Bishop's seventeen drafts of the poem “One Art” to show students that it is not my own rogue theory that good writing is really revision.

2. In my nineteen-year career as a teacher/draft reader, grades 5 through graduate school, I have yet to respond to a student's draft writing without both content and form suggestions.

References

Graff, Gerald & Cathy Birkenstein. *They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co. Inc., 2006.

Sommers, Nancy. "Responding to Student Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 33; 2 (1983): 148-156.

Appendix

Cover Sheet for Research Paper in EDUC 207W, Fall 2006
Interpreting Feedback & Documenting Revision

Your Name: _____

Title of your Research Paper: _____

Part I:

Read through my feedback and summarize your interpretation of what you need to address in your final draft. Record your summary, in a single sentence for each of my comments, in the space below. If the feedback focused on content (your ideas), circle content. If the feedback focused on form (grammar, punctuation, structure, spelling, APA format—all the surface features) circle form.

In my best first draft, I was advised to focus on:

1. _____
content/form (circle one)
2. _____
content/form (circle one)
3. _____
content/form (circle one)
4. _____
content/form (circle one)
5. _____
content/form (circle one)

Part II:

When you finish your revisions, complete the following section:

In the final copy of my research paper, I attended to a) all of b) some of c) none of (circle one) the advice summarized above.

If you answered a or b above, document several of your revisions by summarizing the changes below:

For example:
