

Prompts for Radical Revision

(This text is a direct excerpt from “Radical Revision: Toward Demystifying the Labor of Writing,” by Carley Moore, in *Writing Based Teaching: Essential Practices and Enduring Questions*, edited by Teresa Vilardi and Mary Chang, State University of New York Press, 2009.)

Prompts for generating missing text

Go to a place in your draft where you need to say more. Write to explain. Exhaust yourself. Principle: In early drafts, writers make associative leaps between elements, but don’t explain their terms fully. Why exhaust yourself? When you write a little bit too much, you force yourself a little past what you know.

Go to a place in the draft where you seem to be getting at your idea. Write to explain what that idea might be. Principle: Since many writers get to their ideas only at the end of their draft, this allows the writer to know that she has work to do in other places in the draft. It makes an idea specific when it was previously only almost said or implied.

Write a summary of one of the texts you are working with. Find a place for it in your draft. Principle: Good writers need to provide context for their audience, which may not have read what the writer has read.

Find a key image or key language in your draft. Write to explain what this image or language might mean. Principle: Images and even individual words often contain ideas and questions that reveal themselves with closer reading and writing.

Prompts for making connections

Write an unexpected but connected story that comes to mind as you read your draft. You may not know how it fits, but write about it anyway. Principle: Writers often need help with the show-don’t-tell problem. A surprising story can also offer a tension or highlight a dilemma that the writer may be ignoring or can’t yet see.

Find a place in a published text that helps you think about your idea. Copy the passage out and explain how it connects. Find a place for it in your draft. Principle: In early drafts, writers often don’t know why they’ve chosen a particular passage, but at this point they can often begin to choose texts and passages that really speak to what they are discovering.

Use a passage from another text to resist or doubt something you are writing about. Write to explain the counterargument. Principle: Good writers often include counterarguments to demonstrate that they understand the complexity of the issue they are exploring.

Write a paragraph in which you incorporate two texts. Put these texts in conversation with one another. (How do they extend, confirm, complicate, contradict, correct, or debate one another?) Principle: Typical compare-and-contrast paragraphs or essays can be derailed because the motivation is insufficiently articulated. Putting texts in conversation around an idea or a question can help.

Prompts for clarifying an essay's focus or argument

Rewrite completely the beginning of your draft to articulate specifically the problem your essay is exploring, or to change its focus, tone, or contract. Principle: Early beginnings are often just a placeholder. Writers often need to create a new beginning to accommodate new thinking.

Rewrite completely the ending of your draft to account for how your thinking has changed from the beginning and middle of your essay. Principle: Similar to the previous one, but endings are often even more difficult for writers than introductions.

Find an arbitrary (six to eight) number of claims, concepts, or questions in your draft that are most important to what you have written. Write a six-to-eight-line poem that demonstrates how these claims are related to one another. Principle: Sometimes shifting genres can allow writers to clarify thinking or ideas and then return to the original genre. It can also lead to a distillation of thinking. Sometimes the writer might even make another related piece of writing.

Print out your draft and cut it up into sections (a section can be as small as a sentence) that each contain some discrete piece of thinking. Ask a friend to reassemble the parts in a new order that makes sense, and to tape it to blank sheets of paper, leaving blank space between ideas that are not explicitly connected. If you like this new order, consider what you might need to write in the blank spaces to make transitions or to flesh out ideas.

Throw away pieces that repeat one another in essence or in fact. Principle: Writers often need to radically rethink parts of their essay and how they relate to the whole or the idea. This strategy also allows for cutting.