

Hint Sheet H: Revising Out—Expanding and Amplifying a Draft (Before Revising In)

My argument: We tend to stop down our texts too soon. To tire out, to play it safe, to not invest, to not develop enough text to truly revise. Thorough revision means to revise at the global level (paragraph to whole text) as well as the local level (word and sentence). These exercises (like the sequence outlined in Toby Fulwiler’s essay “A Lesson in Revision”), allow you to generate more text before you close down and finalize your options. I ask writers I work with to choose one of these options after their first full-breadth draft has been shared in a small group response session.

A Fat Draft. Arbitrarily double your text. Turn a one-page poem into a two-page poem. Turn a five-page essay into a ten-page essay. Turn a one-act play into a two-act play. It doesn’t have to be “good” or “better” or “finished” it just has to be honestly twice as long.

A Memory Draft. Read your text carefully. Say two times. Once silently. Once aloud. Then you put it away. Immediately (or if you prefer, after you’ve dreamed upon it), sit down and write another text of at least the same or longer length—you can try to “remember” your text, go off on a tangent, or do both. This is a memory draft; it may closely shadow the original or strike off in a new direction. Again, this does not have to be “good” or “better” or “finished” it just has to be as long or longer and written without a single turning back to the original, except for what you have retained in memory.

Move from Participant to Spectator. Narrate an earlier memory, event, scene, and then move between that time and the present to turn an *event* into an *experience*. Variation 1. Set yourself at a certain age and remember beliefs, way of life, attitudes, scene and then move to the present and reflect on how those beliefs, actions, attitudes, scenes have shifted and why. Variation 2. Revisit an actual site. Tell a past story from that site while actually there. Look around and draw on the present physicality of your location which may require that you shuttle back and forth through time—how it was then, how it is now.

Fragments and Extensions. Reread what you've written. Along the way, collect five words or phrases from your text and freewrite on each word. Let the word or phrase take you anywhere. See if any of this new material helps you open up the draft; can you insert the new material at the point you find the original word or phrase? Somewhere else?

Burrow. Find a place where readers asked for more (or said they were confused). Imagine that every sentence contains its own next sentence. You can hear it if you listen. Begin with a single sentence, to which you add, by the sheer force of language itself, just another sentence, which adds a little bit to the first. Now in place of a single sentence, you have two, to which you add a third. Each time you increase your text, you are adding on to the whole that proceeds it, and each time the whole is transformed. Burrow into the sentences you write as if on an archeological dig. Turn your words and their sounds and their sentences over and over. Listen for the spark, for connections, for the force of your own desire. When the initial impulse of your sentence has exhausted itself, stop. Go to the next sentence marked by readers, proceed as described above, add a new sentence, and continue . . . for a while.

Try Like an Essay Tries. Contradict, associate, use one or more voices, offer multiple truths, digress, argue, stay open, define, redefine, digress, imply, perform. You may want to try all these options on a single word (a core word) from your original text.

Write Between the Lines. Begin with a text you have written. Begin by convincing yourself you have only just begun to know anything about what you have written. Now begin again by writing in between the lines of your text. Between every two lines, insert a new line that adds to, or deepens, or further explores what the lines on either side of it have started. Variation 1. Break each sentence into two sentences, adding to the middle to fill them out. Variation 2a. Identify the basic organizing unit of the text—if you are writing prose, make it paragraphs; for poetry, stanzas. Open the text at the joints of each unit and write something new at each break. Add paragraphs, or stanzas. Repeat as necessary. Variation 2b. Add a different genre between each unit. Variation 3a. Have someone make random slash marks on your text—at each slash mark, break open the text. Variation 3b. Proceed as in Variation 2b above, only at the slash marks.