

Why I Rewrite

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Abstract

Revision is essential to social science. I argue that revision serves multiple purposes, each essential in a different way. I discuss five critical junctures over the course of my career during which each of the purposes became clear.

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1

At some point in junior high school, back in Panama City, Panama, I first heard, but did not quite learn, of the importance of revising. Professor Betancourt, who taught us math and physics for several years, implored us to revise our homework, and exams, before turning them in. “Everyone makes mistakes,” he said in Spanish, “and we make mistakes repeatedly.” As an adolescent, I was sure I was an exception, sure that if I focused enough I could turn in bullet-proof assignments without the drudgery of revising. But in truth it was impossible to complete those long problem sets — to recall formulas, to apply old solutions to new tasks, to solve that many puzzles, to do so much arithmetic by hand — without making mistakes. Everyone made them. Revision was a simple way to ensure that my submission matched my learning, my progress, and my ability. “Revisa, Mario, revisa.” And that is how I first understood revision: as a correction mechanism.

2

In my first year in college, during an English class, I first learned of something deeper. The course required writing a few short papers on the American novels we had read, and the professor, Gregory Blake Smith, implored us “to rewrite, not just revise but to really stop, rethink, and rewrite” our papers before submitting them. Revising and rewriting, he insisted, were different things. It was a small revelation. Until then, to the extent I revised my essays — which, at age 17, I did not always do — I did so with a mind similar to that in my math assignments, to check for and correct errors. Revisions were tweaks. But now I came to see that with a deeper form of revision, one through which I approached the project anew, I could in fact produce a better essay, one clearer than the one I had first drafted. And, thus, through rewriting, I came to understand revision as an entirely different thing: as a clarification mechanism.

3

In my third year in college, I learned something important that I had missed. I had decided I wanted to be a writer of one or another sort. I studied many books on writing, from simple guides such as William Strunk and E.B. White’s (1999) *The Elements of Style* to elaborate handbooks such as Joseph Williams’ (1981) *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. But none of them had a bigger impact on my view of revision than William Zinsser’s (2006) *On Writing Well*, which included something I had never seen before. At the end of Chapter 2, Zinsser included the last two pages of that very chapter’s first manuscript version. The inclusion was a photocopy of the type-written pages, complete with the author’s hand-written editorial changes. The image was eye-opening. Zinsser made vivid what others had not. I saw how he changed “any number of different forms” to “any number of forms,” and how he rearranged and even removed entire passages. Most importantly, I saw that the final two pages of that chapter — the ones he actually published — looked nothing like even the edited version of the manuscript he first drafted. They expressed a similar notion, but with greater cogency and sophistication. He had rewritten the pages not just once or twice but multiple times. And the published version was so completely different from the earlier ones that through rewriting he was self-evidently not just clarifying his ideas; he was in fact producing them. And, thus, I came to understand revision as not only a clarification mechanism but in fact something more important — a production mechanism.

4

In my last year in graduate school, I learned that rewriting for production could entail an additional, and much more radical, act. I was writing my dissertation, eager to be finished. Having done fieldwork in a housing complex in Boston, I was writing a dissertation on neighborhood poverty. I spent many months writing what I had determined would be the dissertation's signal chapter, one that brought fundamental ontological questions to bear on a literature — the research on neighborhood poverty — that was, and remains, less theoretical than empirical. After many months of writing and revising, including a few top-to-bottom rewrites of the entire chapter, I submitted the theoretical exegesis to my committee. One of the members, Katherine Newman, was usually the first to write back, and this was no exception. Her comments were supportive but unambiguous — there was a core flaw, she thought, in my approach to the chapter. I first spent hours thinking through all the reasons she had to be wrong. After all, I had devoted more months to this single chapter than I would spend on the majority of the remaining chapters combined. I read and re-read; I studied and took notes; I tossed and turned, most of it in frustration that she could not see what I thought was my creative conceptual leap. In the end, though, I concluded she was right — the chapter had a major flaw. But there was more. I realized that the chapter's entire conceit was wrong, not just flawed but unsalvageable. So, I chucked it. To my surprise, this defenestration was not, after I had actually executed it, that painful. If anything, it was liberating, because I could see the rest of the dissertation with far more clarity, unburdened as it was now without the heavy, and misguided, theoretical baggage. And, thus, I came to understand fully the importance, in the process of production, of removal. Rewriting is a means to get out of our own way, to drop ideas we have needlessly become attached to. But I realized that cutting could be radical, as sizeable to a work as losing a leg is to the body. But unlike the painful loss of a limb, this process of removal could immediately and self-evidently change things for the better.

5

While writing my last book, many years after I had learned, multiple times, that true revising is rewriting, that only by writing do one's thoughts become clear, that one writes not to report but to produce, and that production requires creation and removal — that revision is, therefore, central to the act of doing social science — I still uncovered something more about revision. In *Someone to Talk to* (Small, 2017), I was reporting a discovery: that, when it comes to trusting others, while we see ourselves as inherently cautious, we nonetheless willingly, and routinely, confide deeply personal problems to people we are not close to. I had discovered that social fact early in the process, and devoted a book to examining its implications. As part of the process, I revised all of the chapters several times, including refining ideas many times over, rearranging paragraphs, and cutting entire sections. Much of what I had learned about revising — about rewriting — I applied. The reviewers were happy with the final manuscript, and the press was just waiting for me to submit the final version for copy-editing. I was nearly done. I set it aside.

Then, over the course of a six-hour flight, I reflected, with some distance in time and space, on the manuscript. Somewhere over the Sierra Nevada, I realized I was wrong. I was not nearly done; regardless of what the reviewers, the editors, and anyone else thought, two of the chapters, and most of a third, needed to be rewritten from scratch. The reasons why were not quite clear at the end of that flight. At the time, I could not yet articulate that the argument lacked coherence; that the chapters needed restructuring; that the arc of the book was flawed. It was

not yet obvious to me that several important ideas were not fully developed. I had not yet understood that the tone was inconsistent; that there were tangents. All I knew at the end of the flight was that, for somewhat nebulous reasons, those chapters were not what I wanted, and that the book, as a result, did not represent who I was. So, I deleted all of them and started over — much happier. And that happiness, saddled as it was with the anxiety and self-doubt that burdens any project, came from the expectation that, by figuring out exactly what *I* believed was wrong with a book that others had nonetheless approved, I would discover something new about myself — that because my unease would not cease until I wrote a draft that no longer felt untrue to me, I would learn one way or the other what dissatisfied me, and, by extension, what I wanted to see in a work that represented me. I would come to learn, for example, that the arc of a book mattered much more to my own work than I might have previously expressed as necessary to a piece of sociology. And thus I came to see clearly what lurked beneath the surface all along: that rewriting is, ultimately, a mechanism for self-discovery.

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