

Three Steps to Revising Your Writing

*for Style, Grammar,
Punctuation, and Spelling*

BARBARA E. WALVOORD

***Three Steps
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Your Writing
for Style,
Grammar,
Punctuation,
and Spelling***

Barbara E. Walvoord

Scott, Foresman and Company
Glenview, Illinois
Boston
London

To my mother, Marie Walvoord

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Walvoord, Barbara E. Fassler

Three steps to revising your writing for style,
grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

Includes index.

- I. Authorship—Handbooks, manuals, etc. I. Title.
- II. Title: 3 steps to revising your writing for style, grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

PN147.W34 1988 808'.042 87-28706

ISBN 0-673-18657-1

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Printed in the United States of America.

123456-KPF-929190898887

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PREFACE

This book shows students how to revise their own writing. It also teaches them the guidelines and conventions they need to use in the revising process.

It is difficult to bridge the gap between a handbook's alphabetized discussions, or a workbook's exercises, and the process of successfully revising one's own prose. "Dangling modifier" is in the handbook under "D," but how are students to know when and how to look for dangling modifiers in their own writing, and how does the search for dangling modifiers fit in with the rest of the writing and revising process? What is the process by which students can effectively revise their own prose for style, grammar, punctuation, and spelling? This book answers those questions for students.

The book is divided into two parts: the first part explains the three steps of the revising process—steps that every student should follow for every piece of writing. The second part contains lessons, keyed to the steps, that teach the conventions and guidelines of style, grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Students use the lessons for reference during the revising process and for systematic study throughout the semester; gradually they become more adept at following the three steps.

THE PLACE OF *THREE STEPS* IN THE TOTAL REVISING PROCESS

Three Steps covers that part of the revision process that occupies the writer's primary attention once the basic theme, structure, and lines of reasoning within the composition are established. The section on "The Revising Process" reminds students that large-scale revisions should be made first, and that later, if a need for further large-scale revisions becomes clear, the writer should temporarily postpone the three steps, returning to them

when the basic structure is once again in place. A case study (pp. 28-37) illustrates how one student writer follows the three steps during a typical recursive writing process. She returns at one point to large-scale revisions before once more taking up matters of style, punctuation, grammar, and spelling.

REVISING AS A PROCESS: THE THREE STEPS

Three Steps suggests to students that they reread drafts in three different ways:

Step 1: Read for meaning and revise style

Step 2: Read with attention to grammatical relationships
and revise grammar and punctuation

Step 3: Read word by word and revise spelling

The steps are ways to read, ways to look. Current research on the revising process suggests that expert writers make several passes through a manuscript, looking for different aspects each time. The research also indicates that expert revisers use problem-solving strategies, not a random approach. This book formalizes and specifies a process for novices that is based on expert writers' practices. It helps students approach revision purposefully and systematically, rather than rereading their drafts only once, glaze-eyed, trying to identify and solve all the problems at once.

The first part of the book contains "How To Use This Book" and "The Revising Process." The three steps are explained. Students learn to read differently for each step. Further, they learn how to manage the revision process as a whole, how to plan their time, how and when to produce clean drafts and final copies, how to utilize the computer in revising, and how to use classmates, tutors, and instructors legitimately to help them revise and learn.

GUIDELINES AND CONVENTIONS: THE LESSONS

The second part of the book contains lessons that teach the conventions and guidelines of style, grammar, punctuation, and spelling. The lessons are keyed to the steps. For example, Step 1, on style, has six points for students to observe, each covered in a lesson: choosing between active and passive voice (Lesson 1A), using transitions (Lesson 1B), using subject/verb and sentence openers for clarity and emphasis (Lesson 1C), and so on.

Step 2, on grammar and punctuation, is divided into sub-steps in prioritized order, beginning with those problems that researchers have indicated are most distracting to readers. In Step 2, students look first for problems with sentence boundaries (fragments, Step 2A; run-ons/comma splices, Step 2B), then problems with verbs and pronouns (Steps 2C–2I), next apostrophe and *-s* (Step 2J), then interior sentence punctuation (Steps 2K–2Q), and finally punctuation with quotations (Step 2R). On any given draft, students read for as many of the points of each step as they know and can apply, using the lessons as needed for study and reference. The outline of the steps and lessons on the inside front cover provides a convenient guide to following the steps and locating the corresponding lessons.

Students use the lessons at two points:

1. During the revising process, they look up conventions for reference. (Students use the thorough, heavily cross-referenced index and also the guide to the steps and corresponding lessons located on the inside front cover.)
2. Between papers, students systematically study the lessons they do not yet know or have not been able to apply during revision.

The lessons focus not only on learning the conventions and guidelines but on learning how to identify problems and then

how to revise them. The lessons are accompanied by diagrams that illustrate the process of reading, identifying, deciding, and revising for each problem. Numerous examples within the lessons are taken directly from student writing so that they reflect the actual problems of typical student writers. As the students study the lessons, they become more skilled at following the three steps of the revising process.

Three Steps introduces only those grammatical terms necessary to understand the conventions and revise effectively. Two introductory lessons teach the basic grammar needed for understanding the rest of the lessons. Students learn how to identify subjects, verbs, and modifiers, as well as dependent and independent clauses, in their own writing.

EXERCISES

Each lesson contains abundant exercises. About two-thirds of the exercises have answers in the back of the book, so students can study and check them independently. Additional exercises repeat the same forms and demands, this time with answers in the instructor's manual.

Exercises begin with simple phrases or sentences, but work up to the situations in which students make most of their mistakes—when their drafts contain distracting or misleading aspects such as a verbal that looks like a verb or a run-on that unites two closely related ideas. Most of the exercises ask students to identify and remedy problems in actual student writing. Many exercises ask students to combine or compose sentences that test their developing ability to revise and manipulate their own prose. Sentence-combining exercises are especially abundant in the introductory lessons, where one of the goals is to help students increase their fluency with written language.

USING *THREE STEPS*

Three Steps may be taught in class or assigned to students for independent work. It may be used with students across a broad range of ability and preparation. Students are encouraged always to follow the three steps, rereading their drafts in three different ways. Well-prepared students may omit lessons that cover material they already know. The lessons may be studied in any sequence. With this book, a wide spectrum of students, working independently or with classroom help, are able effectively to revise their own prose.

The book was field-tested with more than two hundred students taught by four instructors at five institutions. The instructors used the book in different ways, some teaching it in class, some relying on students' independent use of the book. Comments from students and their instructors contributed to revision of the manuscript. Seventeen students in two classes at very different types of institutions and levels of ability were further tested by administering pretests and posttests and by watching and listening as they composed and revised. These students' experiences were used for further revisions of the text. The pretests and posttests, in which students revised grammar and punctuation in actual college student writing, showed that all but two of the students improved significantly in their ability to revise grammar and punctuation. Those two had become more daring in using punctuation they had not before attempted, and were consequently making mistakes with, for example, the placement of the semicolon. So even these two had stepped ahead onto new ground. On the average, the students were able to identify and remedy three times as many grammar and punctuation errors on the posttest as they had on the pretest.

I wrote this book because my own students were unable to make their way from an alphabetized handbook to successful

revising of their own writing. Since I replaced the alphabetized handbook with this book in my own composition classes, both my students and I have been much happier and more successful. That is the outcome that I trust will come, as well, for other instructors and students who use this book.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My greatest debt is to the nearly two hundred students who field-tested this book and who generously shared their problems, responses, and suggestions.

I am deeply indebted to Gail Summerskill Cummins who administered the testing of the manuscript in classes at several colleges and universities. She also gave me invaluable advice based on her own use of the manuscript with her classes at Dundalk Community College and at Towson State University, both in Baltimore. She worked with me in collecting and interpreting data, including think-aloud protocols, showing how our students were learning revising skills and how they were using this manuscript. Her talent and experience as a teacher, scholar, and researcher have contributed significantly to the book.

Others who tested the manuscript in their classes also made important contributions to the book: Frances Alston of Morgan State University in Baltimore and Marianne Spengler of the University of Illinois—Chicago.

I am grateful to those who reviewed the book and offered thoughtful advice: Rosanna Grassi at Syracuse University, Eugene Hammond at the University of Maryland, Kate Kiefer of Colorado State University, Ellen Knodt at Pennsylvania State University—Ogontz, and John Ruszkeiwicz at the University of Texas—Austin. Glynda Hull of the University of Pittsburgh has been extraordinarily helpful, not just through

her review of the manuscript, but through her research on student editing processes.

A quiet retreat for working on the book was made possible by H. Mebane and Ava Turner.

My husband, Hoke L. Smith, offered useful critiques of the manuscript and contributed his full support to the writing of the book. By their cooperation and reliability at home, my children, Brian and Lisa Fassler, have helped me find the necessary time and concentration for writing.

Anne E. Smith and Constance Rajala at Scott Foresman have been wonderful editors—knowledgeable, quick to respond, imaginative, and enthusiastic. Mark Grimes, the Project Editor, improved and tightened the manuscript.

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

This book is intended for writers who need help revising their writing for style, grammar, punctuation, and spelling. It is for those who need lots of help, those who need only a little help, and everybody in between.

The book is organized into two parts. The first, short part describes the three-step *process of revising* any piece of writing for style, grammar, punctuation, and spelling. You use the three steps every time you revise, even if you're not yet very good at them.

The second part of the book, the lessons, demonstrates how to perform the three steps more skillfully. The lessons explain the guidelines and rules of style, grammar, and punctuation. Exercises in the lessons can be used to help you practice. The lessons can be used for reference while revising or as a systematic, week by week study program.

Using this book is like improving your tennis game. When you're playing a match, you use as much as you know and can execute within the pace of the match. In between matches, you come out to the court and just work on your backhand or on your serve, so that gradually the skills you build through practice will feed back into your game.

WHEN TO USE THE THREE STEPS

Writers revise at both broad and local levels. This book assumes that you have already drafted and revised for content, organization, and lines of reasoning. You are now ready to concentrate on style, grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Experienced writers often postpone these "local" revisions until a later stage of the writing process. Novice writers, on the other hand, may get so distracted, in early drafts, by local worries that they don't have the needed energy and concentration for large-scale concerns. The most effective use of this book, then, is to help you conduct a systematic rereading and revision of your writing after the large-scale concerns have been addressed.

However, the writing process seldom proceeds smoothly. It is recursive—that is, it loops around and doubles back. Like most writers, you may be correcting some spelling or reconstructing some awkward sentences as you write or reread early drafts. Also, like many writers, you may bounce back and forth between large-scale concerns like content and organization, and local concerns like spelling and punctuation. You might *think* the content, organization, and lines of reasoning are all satisfactory and start polishing the prose, only to realize that what seems, at first, to be a single awkward sentence actually is the key to a poorly reasoned passage; when you tug on the sentence, the whole section of the paper comes tumbling down. So back you go to large-scale revisions.