PLANNING AND REPLANNING

When you undertake a writing project, one of the early steps in the process is to make an outline. The value of doing so seems self-evident: an outline, with its schematic representation of the argument you hope to make, shows you where you plan to go and keeps you on track so you don't get lost in a thicket of irrelevant details. But, the risk in the outline-driven approach is that anything that threatens to pull the project away from its predetermined destination can be dismissed as irrelevant: potential connections won't get explored, new information won't be pursued, and unsettling insights will be ignored.

In this section, we recommend curiosity-driven approach to planning that assumes replanning is an inevitable and essential part of the writing process. This doesn't necessarily mean abandoning the outline, so much as it means assuming that the outline is likely to get revised as the writing project develops. It means thinking of structure as malleable rather than inevitable; it means anticipating the possibility that revision will yield unforeseen insights that require starting the planning process over again from scratch; it means acknowledging that the failure of the original outline may well be proof that learning has occurred. The creative mind always has a plan, but that plan always includes planning on replanning.

On Structure

John McPhee, the author of twenty-nine books and a staff writer for the *New Yorker* since 1965, is one of the most prolific and influential writers of contemporary nonfiction—which he prefers to call "factual writing." He's written books about subjects as diverse as the geography of the western United States (*Annals of the Former World*); efforts to contain natural destruction caused by lava, water, and mountainside debris flow (*The Control of Nature*); people who work in freight transportation (*Uncommon Carriers*); and even a rogue American professor whose covert actions played a central role in preserving dissident Soviet art (*The Ransom of Russian Art*). While we admire McPhee's work, we draw your attention to him here because McPhee may well be the best writing teacher on the planet. His former students, who collectively have published over 430 books, include David Remnick, a Pulitzer Prize winner and editor-in-chief of the *New Yorker*; Richard Stengel and Jim Kelly, each of whom has served as managing editor of *Time*; Eric Schlosser, author of *Fast Food Nation*; and Richard Preston, author of *The Hot Zone*.

Why are McPhee's students so successful?

One reason is how McPhee trains them to think about structure. In a *New Yorker* essay simply titled "Structure," McPhee offers lessons about writing and its organization that were previously reserved for the small number of Princeton University students lucky enough to get a seat in one of his seminars. He begins the essay by describing the crisis of confidence he faced early in his career when he settled in to write a long article about the Pine Barrens of New Jersey, which he'd been researching for eight months. "I had assembled enough material to fill a silo," he recalls, "and now I had no idea what to do with it." He spent two weeks lying on his back on a picnic table, stymied by panic, unable to see a way to organize his thoughts. Finally, he realized that an elderly native of the Pine Barrens, Fred Brown, had connections to most of the topics he wanted to discuss, so McPhee decided he could begin the essay by describing his first encounter with Brown and then connect each theme to various forays he and Brown made together. Having solved his structure problem, McPhee got off the picnic table

and began to write. "Structure," he says, "has preoccupied me in every project I have undertaken since."

For four decades, McPhee has taught his students that structure should be "strong, sound, and artful" and that it is possible to "build a structure in such a way that it causes people to want to keep turning pages." Nonfiction, in other words, can be as absorbing as a good novel if the structure is right. To teach his students how to find the right structure, McPhee compares preparing to write to preparing to cook.

> The approach to structure in factual writing is like returning from a grocery store with materials you intend to cook for dinner. You set them out on the kitchen counter, and what's there is what you deal with, and all you deal with. If something is red and globular, you don't call it a tomato if it's a bell pepper.

In other words, to plan the structure of a piece of writing, you have to gather all the pieces of your research and lay them out so you can see them at a glance. And as you figure out the structure, you can only work with the facts in front of you.

Before he had a computer, McPhee would type all of his notes, study them, separate them into piles so that his facts were literally in front of him. Then, he would distill them into a set of several dozen index cards. On each card he would write two or three code words that indicated to him a component of the story he wanted to tell. The codes might refer to a location (UNY for upstate New York) or to an event or anecdote ("Upset Rapid"). His office furniture at the time included "a standard sheet of plywood—thirty-two square feet—on two sawhorses." He would scatter his index cards face up on the plywood, anchoring a few pieces and moving the others around until he figured out how to organize the work in ways that were both strong and artful.

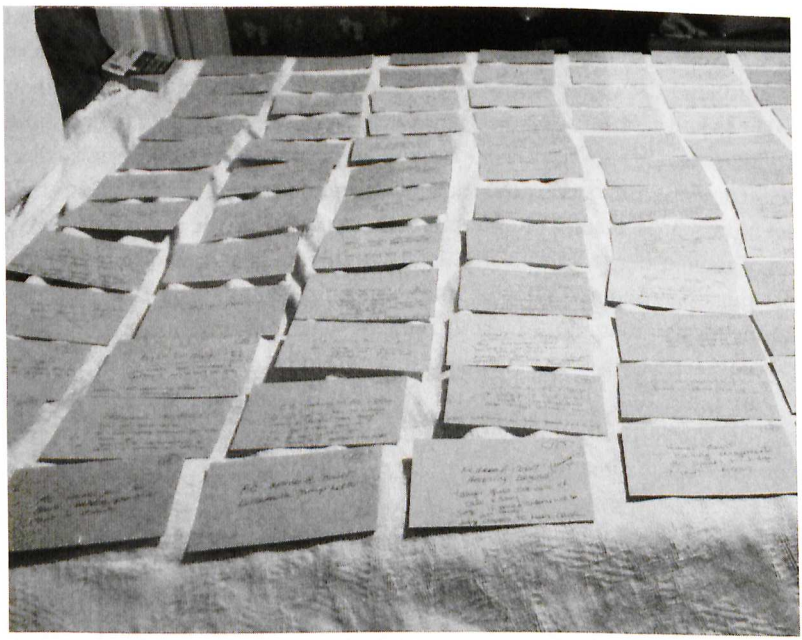
Rebecca Skloot, author of *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, regularly uses McPhee's essay "Travels in Georgia" to teach structure to her writing students. She shows her students that, if you map the narrative of "Travels in Georgia," you can see that it spirals in time: McPhee begins in the middle of the story, goes forward briefly, and then loops backward in time. By the middle of the essay, McPhee has brought his

account back to where it started, and from that point on, he moves the narrative steadily forward in time. Skloot explains that McPhee calls this "the lowercase *e* structure," and she promises that once you recognize it, you'll see it everywhere—in movies, novels, and *New Yorker* articles. (Skloot's exercise teaches her students to read as writers, a topic discussed in our essay "On Reading as a Writer."

Like McPhee, Skloot has a story about grappling for a long time with a writing task. In her case, though, she had to figure out how to organize ten years of research that she had collected for her book. She struggled because she was writing about multiple time periods and had three different narratives: the story of Henrietta Lacks, an African American woman who developed cervical cancer and died at the age of thirty-one in 1951; the story of Lacks's cancer cells, which were cultured without Lacks's consent and continue to be used to this day in medical research; and the story of Lacks's family, especially her daughter, Deborah, who for much of her life did not know that her mother's cells were alive in medical labs all over the world.

Skloot's breakthrough in organizing her research into a readable book came when she was watching *Hurricane*, a movie about the boxer Hurricane Carter, who was falsely convicted of a triple homicide in 1966. Skloot saw that the film braided three different narratives together: the story of Carter's conviction; the story of Carter's twenty years in prison; and the story of how a Brooklyn teen and three Canadian activists successfully lobbied to have Carter's case reopened. She wrote notes about the film's scenes on colored-coded index cards—one color for each of the three storylines—and laid them out on her bed according to where the scenes occurred in the film. Then she placed the color-coded index cards for the three strands of her own book on top of the cards for *Hurricane*. She saw that the film jumped more quickly between the three strands of narrative than her book manuscript did, and that the rapidity of those jumps helped sustain the momentum of each line of the intertwined narrative. When Skloot finally realized how to weave together the pieces of her own narrative, she photographed the rows of colored index cards for posterity. (See this photograph on next page.)

For Skloot to structure her ten years of research as a braided narrative, she had to throw a lot of material away, just as McPhee did when he was sorting the siloful of material he'd collected for his article on the



Rebecca Skloot

Rebecca Skloot's note cards for *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, arranged on her bed.

Pine Barrens. Neither Skloot nor McPhee thought that time spent collecting unused research was wasted, however. McPhee's former student Eric Schlosser recalled how McPhee taught him that deciding what *not* to include is a crucial and often unrecognized step in defining structure. McPhee told him, "Your writing should be like an iceberg." What ends up on the printed page is just the tip of the iceberg, while beneath the surface is all the research, reading, and writing that was done to generate the final product. The reader may not be able to see that work, but it's there—the hidden substructure of the writer's visible work.

. . . . .

In school, the operating assumption is often that there is one structure with which students should work: introduction, body, conclusion. Note that this approach *begins* by prescribing an organizing structure, no matter what the subject or project is, whereas the examples from McPhee and Skloot show the structure emerging *after* the research process is

finished or well underway. In line with these examples, we think that the best time for you to make decisions about structure is *after* you've formulated the question you want to answer, the problem or puzzle you want to solve, or the idea you want to explore, and *after* you've taken time to do substantial research. Once you've gathered your materials, then you can experiment. You can move the ideas around on paper or on digital index cards, testing out possibilities. You can consider whether there's an organic order to your project. You can think about how different parts of your essay seem connected and about how you can best make those connections meaningful to your readers. Then, when you've mapped a possible structure, step back and think carefully about what you see.

Imagine that your index cards define a path readers will follow as you guide them through the development of your thoughts, and consider these questions:

- What shape is the path? Is it straight and simple because you're writing a descriptive essay ("there's this and that and the other thing")? Given the assignment or your ambitions, is this structure sufficient?
- Does the path of your project take interesting turns? Is there a step that takes your thoughts in a new direction? Are there turns that might pivot on a qualifying word or phrase such as *but*, *however*, or *on the other hand*?
- Does the path turn more than once? Does it double back on itself? Does it have a "lowercase *e* structure"? Does it braid three or more strands together?
- Is there a fork in the path? Is there a moment where you entertain multiple options?
- Are there gaps? Does the path abruptly change direction or miss a step between a given section and the one that follows?
- Are there pieces or ideas that don't fit anywhere? Does it make sense to include the material as a digression that eventually leads back to the main path? Would a digression contribute to the essay's overall project?
- Is there a dead end, a place where the path hits a brick wall or goes off a cliff? If so, can you use this dead end to rethink how you've addressed your essay's question or problem?

After remapping the path of your project, step back even further and consider whether the structure you've now laid out is "strong, sound, and artful." We also recommend asking the following questions:

- Where do you see evidence of your curiosity? Your creativity? Your skill at making connections between sources and ideas? Your depth of knowledge? Your mastery of detail?
- If these aren't evident, how could you rework your project? Should you do more research? Formulate a different question or problem?
- Are there places where you ignored information that would have complicated the structure or the path? Are there places where you chose the easier route?

Practice Session One

Researching

We recently discovered the *Nieman Storyboard* Web site, which we recommend for a number of reasons. It not only gathers notable examples of narrative journalism but also includes a series of "Essays on Craft" in which experienced journalists explain how they have moved a story from initial idea to final publication. In addition, there's a series called "Why's This So Good?" in which writers discuss what they value in the work of a fellow writer. You can't go wrong on *Nieman Storyboard*. Explore the site for at least 20 minutes. Then select at least three essays that intrigue you and read them.

Practice Session Two

Reading

If you search on *Nieman Storyboard*, you'll find Adam Hochschild's piece on John McPhee's craft, "'Why's This So Good?' No. 61: John McPhee and the Archdruid." What McPhee calls "structure," Hochschild calls "engineering." Hochschild explains: "A key secret of McPhee's ability to make us care about his vast and improbable range of subject matter lies in his engineering. From

the pilings beneath the foundations to the beams that support the rooftop observation deck, he is the master builder of literary skyscrapers."

As you read the essay about McPhee, pay attention to Hochschild's descriptions of the structure of his favorite works. For example, Hochschild describes *Encounters with the Archdruid* as having been built using a structure that McPhee described as:

$$\frac{ABC}{D}$$

After you've read Hochshild's essay once through, spend at least 30 minutes reviewing his descriptions of four of McPhee's other works: a profile of Thomas Hoving; the book *Levels of the Game*; and the articles "In Search of Marvin Gardens" and "A Forager." Make simple sketches to represent the structure of each of these four works.

Practice Session Three

Reading

Select and read any one of the readings included in this book or, if you prefer, an article from the "Notable Narratives" section of *Nieman Storyboard*. Then spend at least 30 minutes making a detailed map of the essay's structure using any medium you like—a computer graphics program, pen and pencil, crayon and cardboard, or index cards on a bedspread. The map you make should highlight what surprised or impressed you about the writer's structural choices.

Practice Session Four

Writing

Go through your personal archive of papers you've written and select at least three of them. Then make a map or sketch of the structure of each one. Once you're done, step back and think about the relationship between the maps or sketches you generated for this exercise and the ones you generated for Practice Sessions Two and Three above. Your own essays will probably be shorter than Hochschild's essay or the other essays on *Nieman Storyboard*, but what other differences are there between the structure of your writing and the

structure of essays by professional writers? Write an essay that uses the maps of your own writing and those you made for the previous exercises as material for speculating about the relationship between structure and thought.

EXPLORE

David Dobbs describes the structure of Michael Lewis's essay about the Greek financial crisis as "an agile manipulation of a standard trip-to-Oz story form." It can be hard to step back and see the structure of a piece of writing as a whole, but Dobbs's comparison seems obvious after the fact. To help you develop a sense for structure, we invite you to read Lewis's essay alongside Dobbs's analysis, or to read McPhee's "Structure" as well as his interview in the *Paris Review*. While Dobbs and McPhee are concerned with the big picture, the manuscript pages on Joyce Carol Oates's blog provide a more detailed picture of how a fiction writer invents and refines the shape of a novel by making sketches of towns, charts of characters, and lists of scenes and their arrangement.

Dobbs, David. "'Why's This So Good?' No. 15: Michael Lewis' Greek Odyssey." *Nieman Storyboard.* 11 Oct. 2011. Web.

Lewis, Michael. "Beware of Greeks Bearing Bonds." *Vanity Fair.* Oct. 2010. Web.

McPhee, John. "John McPhee, The Art of Nonfiction No. 3." Interview by Peter Hessler. *Paris Review.* 192 Spring 2010. Web.

McPhee, John. "Structure." *New Yorker.* 14 Jan. 2014. Web.

Oates, Joyce Carol. "Manuscripts," "Research and Bibliography." *Celestial Timepiece: The Joyce Carol Oates Home Page.* Web.

On Revising

Every writing lesson in *Habits of the Creative Mind* is implicitly connected to revision. We've repeatedly encouraged you to look and look again. (Another name for the act of reseeing is "revision.") We showed you how being curious requires that you peer around corners, disappear down rabbit holes, and explore the unknown in order to replace old assumptions or confusions with new knowledge and understanding. We showed you that creative habits of mind include being able to reflect on (that is, to resee) how you express yourself and even how you think. In a multitude of ways, reseeing and revising are fundamental practices for writers.

So why include a separate essay on revision? Two reasons, really. First, people who take writing seriously know that writing *is* revising. Indeed, the claim that "there is no such thing as good writing, only good rewriting" is so widely acknowledged by writers that it has been attributed to Robert Graves, Louis Brandeis, Isaac Bashevis Singer, William Zinsser, and Roald Dahl. Second, we know that revision is not a single stage in the writing process but a range of practices that occur throughout the writing process. The distinction is worth driving home, we've found, because many students mistakenly believe that revising is simply correcting errors and tidying up unclear sentences that a teacher marked in an essay draft. In our view this is copyediting, not revision, and it misrepresents true revision.

As writers, we know that rethinking, reseeing, and rewriting can happen at any step in producing a work of writing. In fact, before we drafted the opening paragraphs of *this* essay, we composed two different preliminary outlines and two different introductions. When we determined that neither of those versions worked, we scrapped them and started over. This example isn't an anomaly; writers regularly spiral back to rethink what they've done, entirely abandoning earlier work and beginning all over again. Moments of revision can occur as soon as you've thought your first thought or written your first word; they can occur just when you think you're writing your final sentence; and they can occur anywhere between those two points.

If revision isn't correcting grammatical mistakes and isn't a single step in a linear process, then what is it? We'd like to help you resee

revision by offering descriptions and examples of a variety of ways of returning to the writing you've already completed with the goal of improving it. You won't use all of these practices every time you rewrite, but you're quite likely to use more than one as you work over what you've written.

RETHINKING

As essayists and academic writers, when we contemplate a new project, we spend a lot of time reading, exploring, researching, learning, and thinking before we begin a formal draft. And yet, after composing the first pages or even the entire first draft, we may still find our work unsatisfactory because, in the process of writing about our chosen topic, we have begun to question our original position. Rethinking motivates us to revise globally—to rework our ideas rather than tinker away at surface corrections.

What's the difference between rethinking and tinkering? It's difficult to point to a published example of the former because rethinking typically occurs before publication and thus remains hidden from readers. But writer and blogger Ta-Nehisi Coates makes a practice of rethinking his opinions in public, so we'll look at a moment when he felt obligated to acknowledge that new events had shifted his perspective.

Coates's essay "Fear of a Black President" contends with a paradox at the heart of President Obama's first term in office: "As a candidate, Barack Obama said we needed to reckon with race and with America's original sin, slavery. But as our first black president, he has avoided mention of race almost entirely." To illustrate how constraining this paradox is, Coates looks at a rare public statement on race by Obama in which the president puts that topic—and his own race—at the center of the nation's attention.

On March 23, 2012, Obama was asked to comment on the shooting death of an unarmed black teenager, Trayvon Martin, that had occurred a month earlier in Florida. George Zimmerman, a member of a neighborhood watch patrol, claimed to have shot Martin in self-defense when the young man responded violently to being detained. Obama briefly addressed the uproar that followed Martin's death, saying: "When I think about this boy, I think about my own kids, and I think every parent in America should be able to understand why it

is absolutely imperative that we investigate every aspect of this, and that everybody pulls together—federal, state, and local—to figure out exactly how this tragedy happened." Obama closed with the following statement: "But my main message is to the parents of Trayvon Martin. If I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon. I think they are right to expect that all of us as Americans are going to take this with the seriousness it deserves, and that we're going to get to the bottom of exactly what happened." As mild, measured, and brief as Obama's comments were, a media frenzy ensued. Radio shock jocks and cable TV pundits accused the president of lighting the match that could start a race war. Far from finding Obama's response incendiary, Coates details in "Fear of a Black President" his own frustration with Obama for making such moderate comments and for avoiding an open discussion of race.

As strong as his criticism of Obama was in "Fear of a Black President," Coates displayed his commitment to rethinking in a blog post he wrote after Obama responded to the news that George Zimmerman had been acquitted of second-degree murder and manslaughter charges on July 19, 2013. In this instance, Coates says, Obama spoke *as* an African American and *for* African Americans to explain their suffering over the verdict. We think it's worth quoting Obama's statement in full.

> You know, when Trayvon Martin was first shot I said that this could have been my son. Another way of saying that is Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago. And when you think about why, in the African American community at least, there's a lot of pain around what happened here, I think it's important to recognize that the African American community is looking at this issue through a set of experiences and a history that doesn't go away.
>
> There are very few African American men in this country who haven't had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store. That includes me. There are very few African American men who haven't had the experience of walking across the street and hearing the locks click on the doors of cars. That happens to me—at least before I was a senator. There are very few African Americans who haven't had the experience of getting on an elevator

> and a woman clutching her purse nervously and holding her breath until she had a chance to get off. That happens often.
>
> And I don't want to exaggerate this, but those sets of experiences inform how the African American community interprets what happened one night in Florida. And it's inescapable for people to bring those experiences to bear. The African American community is also knowledgeable that there is a history of racial disparities in the application of our criminal laws—everything from the death penalty to enforcement of our drug laws. And that ends up having an impact in terms of how people interpret the case.

Coates's blog post, "Considering the President's Comments on Racial Profiling," praises Obama for having the courage to speak out personally about the experience of racism: "No president has ever done this before. It does not matter that the competition is limited. The impact of the highest official in the country directly feeling your pain, because it is his pain, is real. And it is happening now." Coates's willingness to change his mind and express his gratitude sets him apart from many other political-opinion journalists. He's committed to presenting himself as an avid learner, and he refuses the pundit's pretense of certainty.

When you're writing for school, it may seem that you don't have the opportunity that Coates has as a blogger to rethink and rewrite; once a paper is handed in, there's usually no going back. But the truth is that every time you sit down to write, you have the opportunity to seek out new information that will complicate or alter what you were thinking before you started writing. This is the lesson we'd like you to take from Coates's work: in order to begin the process of rethinking what you've written, you need to seek out new information and be open to questioning everything, even your own certainties.

RESTRUCTURING

Often first drafts make sense to the writer, but the logic behind what has been written isn't yet clear enough for a reader to follow. This can be caused by gaps in the research or argument; lack of attention to what readers need to know and when they need to know it; too much information

or too many ideas about one topic and not enough about another; or the lack of good transitions. These problems can be addressed through revision that focuses on structure.

The history of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* reveals what a difference structural revisions can make. Fitzgerald sent the manuscript of his novel to his editor, Maxwell Perkins, who immediately saw that it was brilliant but flawed. First of all, the character of Gatsby was too physically vague. "The reader's eyes can never quite focus upon him, his outlines are dim," he wrote to Fitzgerald. "Now everything about Gatsby is more or less a mystery . . . , and this may be somewhat of an artistic intention, but I think it is mistaken." Fitzgerald's reply indicates that defining Gatsby's character was something he hadn't been able to accomplish in the first draft: "*I myself didn't know what Gatsby looked like or was engaged in* & you felt it." Perkins's second complaint about Fitzgerald's presentation of Gatsby was that the character's whole history—his apprenticeship on Dan Cody's yacht, his time in the army, his romance with Daisy, and his past as an "Oxford man"—all tumbled out in one long monologue in the penultimate chapter.

What to do? Perkins suggested that Fitzgerald reorganize the *whole* novel: "you can't avoid the biography altogether. I thought you might find ways to let the truth of some of his claims like 'Oxford' and his army career come out bit by bit in the course of actual narrative." Fitzgerald followed this advice, weaving bits of Gatsby's past more gracefully into earlier chapters. The result? *The Great Gatsby*, first published in 1925, has now sold over twenty-five million copies and is widely considered an enduring example of the Great American Novel.

Notice that Perkins's advice about revising *Gatsby* focused on creating a better experience for the reader. Notice, too, that Fitzgerald couldn't see what *The Great Gatsby* needed until he got the feedback that made it possible for him to view the novel through the eyes of another. (we discuss how to provide and how to respond to such feedback on p. 216)

The Post-Draft Outline

While outside feedback is essential to the revision process, there is a way to defamiliarize your own writing to the point that you can make its implicit structure explicit and, simultaneously, produce a map that can direct your revisions. The way to do this is to produce a "post-draft outline," so called because, instead of making it before you begin to write your draft, you make it after the draft is completed.

The process for making a post-draft outline is straightforward: sequentially number every paragraph in your draft, and then write a one-sentence statement about the main idea or point in each paragraph. When you're done, you'll be able to see the structure of your draft as a whole, which you can then use in a variety of ways to help you assess the quality of the experience you've created for your reader.

1. Your outline gives you a snapshot of the path your draft has taken. To develop this snapshot, read the sentences of your post-draft outline in order, and then read the post-draft outline again, this time thinking through the following questions (which also appear in our essay "On Structure" on pp. 200–05):

- Is the path a straight line? Does it proceed by a series of *and* connections (that is, there's this and this and this)?
- Does the path turn? Is there a paragraph that qualifies what has gone before or takes the conversation in a new direction? Are there sentences or paragraphs that pivot—or could pivot—on a qualifying word or phrase such as *but*, *however*, or *although*?
- Does the path turn more than once? Does it double back on itself?
- Is there a fork in the path? Is there a moment where more than one option is entertained?
- Is there a paragraph that pivots on words or phrases such as *or*, *perhaps*, or *what if*? that introduce more than one possible outcome or position?

- Are there gaps? Does the path abruptly change direction or miss a step between a given paragraph and the one that follows?
- Are there digressions, places where there's a loop off the path that eventually returns to the main path? If the answer is yes, does each digression contribute to the essay's overall project? (Don't assume the answer to this last question is no. In restructuring, some digressions can become central to the newly organized draft.)
- Is there a dead end, a place where the path hits a brick wall or goes off a cliff, never to return? (Again, don't assume that this is necessarily a bad thing; in restructuring, there are times when dead ends can be repurposed to improve your handling of your essay's question or problem.)

After you have a sense of the path you took in your draft you can begin to sketch plans for structural revision.

2. Before you begin to rewrite, return to the draft and reassess it as a snapshot of your mind at work on a problem.

- Where is your curiosity in evidence? Your creativity? Your skill at putting original sources into conversation? Your interest in language? Your mastery of detail? How can these be made more evident in revision?
- Spend some time thinking about what you've left out of your draft. Are there places in the draft where you ignored ideas or information that would have complicated the journey? Where you chose to go where you were expected to go instead of where your thinking was pointing you? What can you do now to introduce ideas and information that would make your essay more interesting?
- Could anyone else have written the draft, or is it obvious to you that it's *yours*? How can you make the essay even more your own?

By using the post-draft outline in this way, you'll be serving as your own Maxwell Perkins: you'll assess both what your draft is and what it might become through structural revision.

LETTING GO

Cutting sentences and paragraphs, or cutting everything and starting over from scratch: has there ever been a writer who enjoys this part of the writing process? Has there ever been a writer of note who could skip the cross-out, the toss, the "Ctrl-A, Delete"? No. But the difference between beginning writers and experienced writers is that experienced writers have practiced encountering the newly blank screen; they know that the blinking cursor can be set in motion once again and that there are always more words out there somewhere. Beginning writers, without much practice starting over, tend to fear the blank screen and to see deleted work as wasted time rather than as an unavoidable part of letting the mind work on a problem.

To encourage our students to see letting go as a habit of creative minds, we tell a story about going to hear Nobel Prize–winning writer Toni Morrison read from a work in progress. Morrison approached the lectern, paused, and then told the audience that the year before she'd completed well over a hundred pages of the novel's manuscript, but that she stood before us that night to read from the forty or so pages she had left. What had happened? Revision happened. Morrison had set out in one direction and then had to spend a year peeling off pages and pages of what she'd written until she found work that met her standards.

The Morrison anecdote can be read as an extension of the quote we opened this essay with: "there is no such thing as good writing, only good rewriting," and all good rewriting involves letting go. We hear this idea repeated in Colette's definition of an author: "Put down everything that comes into your head and then you're a writer. But an author is one who can judge his own stuff's worth, without pity, and destroy most of it." Novelist Anne Lamott makes this point about letting go in perhaps its bluntest form in her popular book *Bird by Bird*, where she asserts that all good writers write "shitty first drafts," drafts that they know will be thrown away. "This," she says, "is how they end up with good second drafts and terrific third drafts."

While Lamott's specific recommendations may not apply to all writing or to all writers, we believe there's real value in her advice to view draft after draft as practice, as work that may never see the light of day but that is valuable nonetheless. If you give yourself sufficient time to use writing to help yourself think, knowing that you are going

to get rid of most of it before anyone else sees it, then maybe, as Lamott writes, you'll find "something in the very last line of the very last paragraph on page six that you just love, that is so beautiful or wild that you now know what you're supposed to be writing about, more or less, or in what direction you might go—but there was no way to get to this without first getting through the first five and a half pages."

GETTING FEEDBACK

Most writers don't publish until after they've gotten feedback from friends, colleagues, and editors. We think that getting feedback from people whose work you admire is probably *the most important revision practice of all.*

To acheive this Kerry Walk, a teacher we admire, recommends that cover letters accompany all drafts submitted for feedback. If you were to compose such a cover letter, Walk would advise you to state:

- the main question or problem your writing seeks to address;
- the idea or point you feel you've made most successfully;
- the idea or point you feel you need help with;
- your number one concern about your paper that you'd like your reader to answer for you; and
- any questions you have about how or where to start your revision.

The advantage of a cover letter of this kind is that it gives your reader a clear sense of how you see your draft and where you think it needs work. Your reader need not agree with your assessment, but the letter gives your reader a way to gauge his or her response to what you've written and to adjust that response accordingly.

TAKING A BREAK

The best way to see your writing with fresh eyes is to set your draft aside—for a day if that's all you have, or for longer if possible. When you pick it up again, you'll be able to see more clearly what's working and what's not. And the feedback you've received, which may have caught you off guard at first, may now seem more reasonable. The point is to

give yourself time to reenergize, so that you don't resort to tinkering on the edges of your writing when you really need to be rethinking and restructuring your first draft.

Prolific writer Neil Gaiman explains taking a break also allows you to return to your work as a reader, instead of as its writer. Once a draft is done, he advises, "put it away until you can read it with new eyes. . . . Put it in a drawer and write other things. When you're ready, pick it up and read it as if you've never read it before. If there are things you aren't satisfied with as a reader, go in and fix them as a writer: that's revision." By "fix them as a writer," he means rethinking, restructuring, letting go of what's not working, getting feedback, writing again, polishing—doing whatever it takes to move the writing forward.

Practice Session One

Reflecting

Spend at least 20 minutes reflecting on your experiences with revision and your thoughts about trying new approaches. What is your typical approach to revision? Which of the strategies that we describe in this essay have you tried before? Which approach seems easiest for you? Which approach seems most challenging or unsettling?

Now commit to setting aside the time you need to practice revision in new ways. Make a resolution to try at least three of these strategies—rethinking, restructuring, post-draft outlining, letting go, getting feedback, taking a break—before handing in your next paper. Which three do you think you'll try?

Practice Session Two

Researching

Do an online image search for "manuscript revisions." You'll get many pages of results. Explore, clicking on images of manuscripts that call out to you and visiting the pages where they are embedded. Look for examples from writers you admire. Then spend at least 30 minutes examining several images carefully, taking notes on how various writers revise. What can you learn about writing and revision by looking at marked-up manuscript pages?

Writing

Write an essay that examines three or more of the manuscript revisions you find most interesting. Explain what you've learned from these specific examples about various processes for revising.

Practice Session Three

Writing

Take a final draft that you wrote recently and see if you can cut it by at least 25 percent without losing the main argument or ideas. After you've cut your original piece by a quarter, compare the original version to the shorter, revised one. What's better about the more concise version? What's better about the longer one?

Then try cutting the shortened version by 25 percent again. What happens to your argument or ideas this time?

Practice Session Four

Revising

If you have a draft you're presently working on, follow the advice in "Getting Feedback" and find a tutor, teacher, or fellow student who agrees to give you feedback. Spend at least 20 minutes writing a one-page, single-spaced cover letter that explains your concerns about the draft. Give this letter to your reader with a copy of the draft, and schedule a meeting to discuss his or her feedback.

After you've received your reader's feedback, figure out what kind of revision the feedback suggests is most necessary: Should you try rethinking, restructuring, letting go, or a combination of strategies? Then revise.

EXPLORE

The word *revision* refers to many practices—from rethinking and restructuring to polishing sentences. For Adrienne Rich, revision is a process of reading and writing—reseeing texts from the past to make new thoughts, stories, and poems possible. Other forms of revision, especially sentence-level editing, have

become essential elements of writing due to advances in technology. Craig Fehrman describes the typewriters emergence as a writing tool at the beginning of the twentieth century. You can see examples of famous writers' manuscript revisions at the *Bad Penny Review* and the *Paris Review* Web sites. At the *Paris Review*, we recommend looking at the work of Salman Rushdie and Joan Didion.

Fehrman, Craig. "Revising Your Writing Again? Blame the Modernists." *Boston Globe*. 30 June 2013. Web.

Rich, Adrienne. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision." *College English* 34.1 (October 1972). 18–30. Print.

"Murdering Your Darlings: Writers' Revisions." *A Bad Penny Review*. Web.

"Interviews." *Paris Review*. Web.

(To get to the manuscript files, first select an interview; then click on the "view a manuscript page" button in the menu under the title. Zoom in on the pages to read them.)

On Learning from Failure

When we watch children building a sandcastle on a summer beach, we see creativity in action. The process seems so simple. The castle grows and becomes more elaborate—with moats, towers, turrets, and carefully laid rows of shells—until late in the day it's abandoned, to be reclaimed by the tide before morning. If we watch more closely, however, we can see that the activity of building is more than just adding more and more pieces.

When we look again we notice how often things go wrong. An unexpected wave knocks down an hour's worth of building. A toddler wanders over from a neighboring beach blanket and causes more destruction. The sand dries and walls crumble. Unless disagreements and exhaustion take over, we also see the kids recover from failures. They experiment to figure out how to build a better moat to stay the tide. The toddler is distracted by collecting shells. A bucket brigade creates a pile of wetter sand. Or the construction project is moved up or down the beach to a better location. When children are at play, often enough they react to failures as opportunities for invention. They're not afraid of failure, because the stakes are low. The point is simply to have fun.

However, once we become adults, we're likely to avoid situations where the prospect of failure is high. Whether at work or school, most of us fear tackling a complex problem in front of our peers because of the possible consequences of failing: i.e. embarrassment, shame, a lower grade, a demotion. This fear of failure stifles creativity and innovation.

Not all people respond to fear of failure in the same way, though. In fact, creative people tend to have an attitude toward failure that's more like the kids on the beach than like a typical adult trying to solve a problem at work or a student trying to figure out what the teacher wants him to say. In *What the Best College Students Do*, Ken Bain argues that what sets the best students apart from the rest is their willingness to acknowledge failures, to explore them, and to learn from them. Unlike less creative people, they didn't deny their mistakes or get defensive about errors.

Where does this ability to bounce back from failure come from? To answer this question, Bain points to a study that compared two groups of ten-year-olds who were each given a series of puzzles. The first eight problems required the students to make real effort, but the challenges matched the students' age and education level. The next four problems were designed to be too hard for the students to solve. Over the first eight problems, there were no differences in how the groups performed; both groups talked about the problems as they worked through them, had fun, and came up with roughly the same number of correct solutions. On the second set of problems, however, the groups' reactions differed greatly from each other. The first group got frustrated, complained, and tried to change the rules; they started to make surprisingly poor choices, shifted their focus away from the problems, and gave up. By contrast, the second group continued to encourage each other, tested different approaches, and seemed to thrive on the challenge, even though they couldn't solve the hard problems either.

What caused the divergent responses? The students were grouped by researchers based on their attitudes toward intelligence. The first group had a fixed view of intelligence and the second group believed, conversely, that with effort you could become smarter. (As shorthand, we call members of the first group the "knowers" and members of the second group the "learners.") When the knowers faced failure, they looked for an escape route, because their failures called their intelligence into question; they went into mental tailspins, reverting to strategies that might be expected from preschoolers. The learners didn't take failure personally. Because they believed they could develop intelligence, working on the problems was its own reward. Even if they never found solutions, they valued learning things along the way.

Obviously, we can't just snap our fingers and change ingrained beliefs and patterns of behavior. And we can't change the fact that in some situations, when the stakes are immediate and high, it's nearly impossible to sustain an impersonal attitude toward failure. We believe, however, that it is possible to cultivate more creative attitudes toward failure through practice, and one of the most important locations for such practice in school assignments where time is allowed for experimentation and revision—such as the writing assignments (which we call "practice sessions") provided throughout *Habits of the Creative Mind.*

You've probably noticed that these practice sessions ask open questions or pose messy problems that can't be responded to simply with facts or by following a formula to a right answer.

In our writing classes, we encourage students to pursue what interests them, and we're thrilled when they set aside their fears and egos and risk exploring really knotty problems. In the end, even if their efforts come to naught, these students tend to learn from their mistakes. They figure out what went wrong and decide what they'll do differently the next time.

When we learn from failure, we discover that practice never ends.

Practice Session One

Reflecting

As a thought experiment, look back at what kind of student you were in middle school and in high school. Then imagine what school would have been like for you if grades hadn't mattered to parents or college admissions committees. Would you have taken more risks as a writer and learner, or would you have worked less?

Then set aside at least 30 minutes to reflect on the kind of school that could foster an environment in which students, including you, would be willing both to work hard and to "fail big." At your college, are there classes, teachers, or majors that encourage or even require students to take creative and intellectual risks?

Practice Session Two

Reading

In "Fail Better," an essay about writing, Zadie Smith identifies the cliché as a small-scale example of literary failure. "What is a cliché," she asks, "except language passed down by Das Mann [the Man], used and shop-soiled by so many before you, and in no way the correct jumble of language for the intimate part of your vision you meant to express? With a cliché you have pandered to a shared understanding, you have taken a short-cut, you have represented

what was pleasing and familiar rather than risked what was true and strange." This isn't the usual definition of failure, but it's a useful way of thinking about how to write well. While there are occasions when settling for the pleasing, familiar, and expected is the polite thing to do, success for a writer seeking new thoughts means having written something unfamiliar, unexpected, even unsettling—productively unsettling.

We'd like you to choose one of the readings we've included in this book and look for passages in which the writer is productively disruptive, rather than pleasing and familiar.

Then spend at least 40 minutes reflecting in writing about three passages from the reading that you think are particularly risky. Was the writer's risk worthwhile? Did the writer succeed or fail in Zadie Smith's terms? How about in your terms?

Practice Session Three

Reflecting

We imagine it would be pretty straightforward to ask you to write about a time when you learned from failure. So instead of asking you to write up an account of a moral or educational failure that ends in self-improvement—"and ever afterwards, I was a better person"—we'd like you to write about a time when you failed to understand a concept or idea. What were the consequences of your failure? What rewards, if any, followed from overcoming that failure?

EXPLORE

We know how failure feels: we're disappointed in ourselves and ashamed of disappointing others. Catherine Tice describes the regret and loss that has accompanied her failure to become a musician. When the British daily newspaper the *Guardian* asked seven writers to reflect on failure, however, few of them expressed regret. Most wrote about failure as an inherent part of writing, inseparable from creativity. While even these writers fall into platitudes about failure as opportunity, together their comments suggest a more nuanced view: it's possible to fail *well*—to learn from failure, to make use of it, and to continue to work. Learning from failure also concerns Paul Tough, who wonders

whether schools that protect students from failure in the short term ultimately set them up for failure in the long term.

"Falling Short: Seven Writers Reflect on Failure." *Guardian.* 22 June 2013. Web.

Tice, Catherine. "A Brief History of a Musical Failure." *Granta.* 2 Oct. 2013.

Tough, Paul. "What If the Secret to Success Is Failure?" *New York Times Magazine.* 18 Sept. 2011. Web.

Curiosity at Work: Alison Bechdel and the Layered Complexity of the Graphic Narrative

When Alison Bechdel began publishing her comic strip, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, in 1983, the possibility of anyone becoming a graphic memoirist—that is, someone who tells her life story using words and images—wasn't on anyone's radar. In the 1980s, the comic form was restricted largely to "the funnies" in the newspapers and to serialized stories about superheroes sold on rotating racks in convenience stores. The readers of these stories were assumed to be mostly, if not exclusively, teenage boys. A young woman just out of college composing a comic strip that followed the lives of feminists, lesbians, and gays? Not exactly a foolproof plan for success.

And yet Bechdel, inspired by Howard Cruse's *Gay Comix*, was convinced that she could use the comic form in a new way and that she could reach a different demographic with different reading interests. While she didn't set out to produce a strip that would steadily gain popularity and influence, this is exactly what Bechdel ended up doing, by dint of her ability to unite her meticulously drawn characters (some of whom were suggested to her by her avid fans) with compelling lines of narrative that crisscrossed the genres of political commentary, melodrama, and humor. (Bechdel has described the strip as "half op-ed column and half endless, serialized Victorian novel.") And this unlikely project earned Bechdel a living and numerous awards during the twenty-five years she kept *Dykes to Watch Out For* in syndication.

Bechdel's breakout work as a graphic memoirist came in 2006 when she used her cartooning skills to tell her own coming-of-age story *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (the title is a play on the fact that Bechdel grew up above a funeral home). The mystery that resides at the center of *Fun Home* is her father's apparent suicide, which occurred shortly after Bechdel left home for college. Told from the dual perspective of Bechdel as a child moving into adolescence and contending with her eccentric family in rural Pennsylvania, and Bechdel as a mature, successful cartoonist reflecting on the past, *Fun Home* provided Bechdel

with a means of exploring her past that simply wasn't available to her in the comic strip form.

Bechdel's sustained attention to detail, which is evident in every cell and every word of her narrative, allows her to see all of the players in this tragicomic tale in their complex humanity: her father, who was a mortician, fastidious home restorer, strict disciplinarian, and guardian of a secret life; her mother, who was an actress, distant and miserable; her brothers; the townspeople; her first female lover in college; and herself. In an interview, Bechdel described how the graphic narrative allowed her to reproduce the multiple perspectives that are ever-present in real life: "Every moment that we're living and having experiences, we're bringing to bear all of the other experiences that we've had. This is what is exciting to me about graphic narrative, that you're able to do a layered complexity that I couldn't imagine doing with just writing."

An instant success, *Fun Home* was followed in 2012 by *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama*, Bechdel's equally incisive exploration of her mother's life in the time before and after Bechdel's father's mysterious death. In 2014, Bechdel received a MacArthur "genius" grant in recognition of her ongoing work "changing our notions of the contemporary memoir and expanding the expressive potential of the graphic form."