Revision: Process and strategies

Patterns of revision: Experienced and inexperienced writers

Multiple studies of revision practices (Faigley & Witte, 1981; Flower et al., 1986; Sommers, 1980; Witte, 1985) have demonstrated that experienced writers and inexperienced writers revise differently. According to Sommers (1980), inexperienced student writers tend to revise only for sound and word-level problems (grammar, sound repetition), while experienced student writers focus on structural and audience problems (argument, appropriateness for the context). This finding is supported by Faigley and Witte (1981). In their study, inexperienced student writers focused mainly on surface revisions, while experienced student and professional writers made revisions that altered the meaning of the text (defined by any revision that would change a summary of the text) and only then moved on to surface problems.

Interestingly, in an analysis of revision studies, Witte (1985) notes that some experienced professional writers make fewer revisions than the experienced student writers (but still more than the inexperienced writers, and those revisions pay more attention to structural rather than surface changes). He attributes this result to the ability of experienced writers to generate a “pre-text,” that is, a mental version of the text which is used as a blueprint for their writing.

The process of revision

Witte (1985) also notes that, despite the theories of written composition that were current at the time, theories that described the writing process as a linear one where there are distinct phases of writing (planning, researching, drafting, revising) and writers move from one to the other in a straight line, in practice, writers tend to move freely through these different stages in a recursive, hierarchical manner. Flower et al. (1986) note that there are three stages to revision: 1) detecting problems in a text, 2) diagnosing those problems, and 3) selecting a strategy to deal with those problems. This list seems to agree with Sommers's research (1980), for she argues that inexperienced writers only focus on sound and word-level problems because they do not have strategies for dealing with structural problems.

Summary

Inexperienced writers only worry about surface issues like grammar and the sound of a text when they revise, and they make fewer revisions than experienced writers. Experienced writers revise for structural and meaning problems, especially those that affect their audience, and they revise more often than inexperienced writers. However, there is not a strict correlation between number of revisions and quality of writing.

Revising text is a recursive process. For example, revision may identify problems that lead to more drafting, which may point to the need for more research. After researching, the writer will do more drafting, and only then return to revision. Revision for structure and meaning is only possible when writers develop the ability to detect problems in a text, diagnose those problems, and form strategies for dealing with them.

Bibliography


