

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN READING AND SUCCESSFUL REVISION

ABSTRACT: This essay discusses a study conducted to determine whether students who reread their drafts aloud as they revise compose essays that are stylistically superior to those of students who do not do so. It was found that this activity does seem to make a difference for students with adequate to proficient reading skills, but does not make a difference for poor readers. The implications of the study's findings are that basic writing courses should focus on reading and style, in addition to the principles of organization and grammar that such courses are usually restricted to, and should encourage students to reread aloud as they revise.

Background and Hypothesis

In the spring quarter of 1994, I was assigned, in lieu of one of my regular developmental composition classes, tutoring responsibilities in the writing lab run by the division in which I teach — the University of Georgia's Academic Assistance (formerly Developmental Studies) Program. The lab is a place where students in our basic writing courses can go to get help with their writing or to compose their essays on the computer. This particular quarter, a student, whom I will call William, regularly attended the lab to work on his essays in progress. Because he was often the only student there during my assigned hours, I had an opportunity to observe his composing habits closely, and what I witnessed fascinated me. Unlike most of the students attending the lab, who would usually just type a first draft and then run the spelling checker, William spent a great deal of time on revision. He would recast a sentence or a sequence of sentences and then stop and read aloud the larger passage containing his changes. He would read with expression and emphasis, and if his changes didn't sound right, he would usually sigh or mutter "No" and then rewrite the sentence yet again, repeating the whole process several times until he was pleased with the sound of his writing. His final drafts, though by no means

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perfect, were always notably smoother and more fluent than his early drafts.

Curious as to how William had developed this revision habit, I questioned him about his educational background. I learned that he was an older student, in his mid twenties, who was just starting college after several years in the Navy. He said he had been an indifferent high school student who had always had a difficult time in his English courses but that in the Navy he had discovered the pleasures of books. At sea for days, he would spend hours reading the works of famous authors, and gradually he developed the desire to become a writer himself. Someone suggested to him that in order to achieve his goal he needed to attune his ear to good prose style and that the best way to do this was to read books aloud. He heeded this suggestion, and allegedly read the entire *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* aloud, as well as portions of other non-fictional and fictional classics. In trying to improve his own writing style, then, he found it helpful to listen to the rhythm of his prose and thereby detect whenever a sentence or a sequence of sentences sounded awkward.

Talking with and observing William caused me to reflect on my own composing habits, and I realized that I too rely on my ear at a particular point in the writing process. In the latter stages of a writing project, when I am fine-tuning the work, I usually read through my draft listening to the rhythm and fluency of my prose and making changes in phrasing or word order whenever a construction or passage strikes me as awkward or unpleasing. Although I generally do not read my drafts at the volume William did his, I do read in such a way that I can *hear* rather than merely *see* the words, usually in a barely audible whisper. I suspect many experienced writers do the same, and I speculate that one of the differences between weak writers and effective writers may be that the former do not go through this aural rereading process. It is this hypothesis that I decided to test.

Stage One: Observation of Basic Writers' Composing Habits

I began my investigation in an informal way, by observing my students over the next three quarters whenever they wrote in-class essays (these essays are usually stretched out over three or four class periods) and questioning many of them about their revising habits when I held student conferences. What I learned from my observations of and conversations with them was that the poorer writers generally wrote only one draft and then, rather than truly revising, proceeded to make merely superficial changes, such as correcting spelling and punctuation errors and substituting fancier synonyms for words they considered too plain. Furthermore, they did this "revising" in a

piecemeal fashion, rarely stopping to read over larger passages to see whether their changes fit coherently and fluently into the whole. Once finished making these changes, they would simply copy over their marked-up draft and turn it in. The result would be a choppy and awkwardly written piece, marred by problems with both coherence and sentence structure.

My better writers, on the other hand, revised more, and revised more comprehensively. In their early drafts they would usually focus on improving content and organization, and in their subsequent drafts they would turn their attention to style, sentence structure, and fluency. Whereas the weak writers just kept marking up their first draft—crossing out, squeezing in revised phrases, weaving arrows all over the page to connect with changes inserted in the margins—the stronger writers often rewrote their drafts or portions of their drafts. These clean new copies were easier and more inviting to read through than the confusing, marked-up drafts of the poor writers. Not surprisingly, then, the better writers did tend to read through what they had written before embarking on another revision, and while revising, especially in the later drafts, they would frequently stop and reread sections to assess whether their changes fit in. When writing in class, these students of course would not read their drafts out loud, but with many of them I did notice slight movements of the lips and prolonged expressions of intense concentration, suggesting that they were listening carefully to what they were reading. This behavior contrasted with that of the weaker students, who appeared to be merely scanning the page with an eye for errors or poor word choices and who continually interrupted their scanning to consult their dictionary or thesaurus or handbook.

Stage Two: Survey of Research Done on the Composing Process

The next step in my investigation was to do secondary research to ascertain whether any composition specialists have noted and explored the relationship between stylistic proficiency and the habit of aural rereading of drafts. From the 1960s to the mid 1980s, much research was done on the writing process. This movement was triggered in good part by the urging of Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer in their 1963 NCTE book *Research in Written Composition*, which was echoed in 1978 by Cooper and Odell in another NCTE book, *Research on Composing*. Pointing out that research in the past had focused almost exclusively on the written product, these authors emphasized the need for a greater understanding of the process that gives rise to this product. Accordingly, the '70s and '80s saw a plethora of case studies that attempted to analyze the cognitive and behavioral stages people go

through as they write. Beginning with Janet Emig's famous 1971 study of the composing processes of twelfth graders, numerous researchers (most notably, Linda Flower and John R. Hayes) used protocol analysis, in which subjects are tape recorded while composing aloud, as well as other methods, to observe and draw conclusions about the writing and revising behaviors of different levels of writers.

A major finding that came out of this period of intensive investigation of the writing process, and one which coincides with my own firsthand observations, is that proficient writers review and revise their pieces of writing much more extensively than do weak writers. In a 1981 article, Susan Wall and Anthony Petrosky report the results of a study they did of the revision habits of freshman writers that revealed that basic writers restrict their rereading and revising to isolated sentences, whereas superior writers reread and revise whole passages. Brian Monahan's 1984 article, "Revision Strategies of Basic and Competent Writers as They Write for Different Audiences," reports similar findings, as does Charles Stallard's "An Analysis of the Writing Behavior of Good Student Writers" (1974) and Ann Humes's "Research on the Composing Process" (1983). In a 1980 article entitled "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," Nancy Sommers reports that of the four revision operations—deletion, substitution, addition, and reordering—weak student writers engage in the first two almost exclusively, and do so mainly on the word or phrase levels. Experienced adult writers, in contrast, engage in all four operations and do so on a much more global level. Much of the research into the composing process found that weak writers do not understand the meaning of the word "revision": they confuse it with editing. These writers thus jump prematurely to the editing stage. Researcher Sondra Perl studied the composing processes of five unskilled college writers and observed that editing intrudes so frequently that it constantly interrupts the student's composing rhythms.

Since the mid '80s the focus in composition research has shifted away from the cognitive aspects of writing towards the social aspects. Representative of this new approach are the works of Deborah Brandt (1990), Glynda Hull, Mike Rose, et al. (1991), and Anne Dyson (1994), which explore how social contexts, including race, class, and gender, influence writing. At least one composition theorist, however, has protested against this movement away from the cognitive: John R. Hayes argues that there is still much to be learned about the roles played by working memory, reading ability, affect, and other cognitive factors in the writing process ("A New Framework for Understanding Cognition and Affect in Writing" 12-13). I would have to agree, for although the cognitive research done in the '70s and '80s discovered much about the composing habits distinguishing weak writers from strong writers, no one precisely addressed the question that I am interested in—

namely, whether another significant difference between such writers is that the latter reread their drafts aloud and the former do not. In fact, the very nature of most of these studies precluded the researchers' being able to draw conclusions about this question. That is, since most of these studies used protocol analysis, which *requires* subjects to compose aloud, there was no way to tell whether some subjects would have naturally reread their work aloud and some would not have. Thus, because the connection between style and aural reviewing has not been addressed, I decided to explore it and to devise a method other than protocol analysis with which to do so.

Stage Three: Classroom Experiment to Test Hypothesis

The classroom phase of my experiment was conducted in the fall quarter of 1995. On the first day of class, I had the students in two of my basic writing classes fill out a questionnaire concerning their extra-curricular reading habits and their essay revising habits (see Table 1). Then throughout the quarter, every time they submitted an essay I had them turn in a statement indicating whether or not they had reread their essay aloud while revising. (I emphasized that by "aloud" I did not necessarily mean at a normal speaking volume but simply in such a way that they could hear what they had written—for example, in a very faint whisper.)

In addition, I divided my two classes into a control group class and an experimental group class. To the former I simply stated that I was doing research on the composing processes of freshman writers in an attempt to determine whether reading one's drafts aloud has any effect on the quality of the final product. To the latter I explained what my hypothesis was, and I urged them to read their drafts aloud while revising. But to both groups I emphasized that their grade on an essay would in no way be affected by what they said in their statement indicating whether or not they had read aloud, and I stressed the importance to my study of their being honest in their statements.

The last week of the quarter, I had both classes write a short in-class essay. They were given two periods for this and were urged to revise their essay at least once, as well as to edit the final draft. I then had three experienced composition teachers in our program do a holistic scoring of these essays, evaluating them solely for style and mechanical correctness. The teachers were instructed to give a score of #4 to essays relatively strong in both style and mechanics, a #3 to essays relatively strong in style but not mechanics, a #2 to essays relatively strong in mechanics but not in style, and a #1 to essays weak in both style and mechanics.

At the outset of my experiment I made two tentative predictions.

First, I predicted that the more proficient readers (as indicated by their answers on the initial questionnaire) would read over their drafts aloud more regularly (according to the statements submitted with their essays) and would receive higher scores on the final writing sample than would the less proficient readers. Second, I predicted that the experimental group would read their drafts aloud more regularly (because they had been urged to) than the control group and that, accordingly, the experimental group's final writing sample scores would be on the average higher than the control group's. As the discussion below and Table 1 indicate, students' answers to the questions on the questionnaire about their reading and revising habits were not reliable enough to ascertain the validity of my first prediction; however, my second prediction appears to have been borne out.

Results and Findings of Classroom Experiment

The questionnaire given on the first day of class began by asking students if they frequently do non-required or pleasure reading. Since the course is for students with weak writing skills, my assumption was that most of them would circle "no" in response, for, as researchers Lynn Quitman Troyka and John Butler have pointed out, poor writers are usually poor readers. I was therefore surprised to find that the vast majority of my students (84%) circled "yes." However, their response to the follow-up question asking them to state the approximate amount of pleasure reading they do daily or weekly seemed to contradict this claim, indicating either that they have a mistaken notion of what frequent reading is or that they had circled "yes" simply because they wanted to make a good impression on the teacher at the beginning of the quarter. Specifically, the vast majority (71%) of those who answered this question concretely and in terms of minutes per day or week indicated that they generally read less than 30 minutes a day, with some saying as little as 30 to 90 minutes per week. Furthermore, many indicated that their reading is done sporadically, a few minutes here and there when they get the chance, and that they mainly scan newspapers and magazines, dipping in and out of articles that interest them. In short, their descriptions of their reading habits reveal that, despite their affirmative response to question #1, they in fact do very little reading and very little sustained reading.

A third question asked them to state what it is they read for pleasure. Their answers here were revealing too. By far the bulk of what they read is newspapers and magazines; specifically, newspaper and magazine articles constituted 73% of the types of reading material mentioned. Furthermore, their answers indicated that they read mainly the sports and entertainment section of the newspaper and — almost

exclusively — popular magazines, such as *Seventeen*, *Entertainment*, and *Jet*. Some students even listed catalogues and *T.V. Guide*, and one student went so far as to include “junk mail” as one of his kinds of extra-curricular reading! While a handful of students indicated that they also read books, their examples indicated that they do not read difficult or challenging works (romance, horror, and spy tales were the most common). Furthermore, many of those who listed books and novels gave the impression that they read this genre only occasionally or rarely; for example, many would first mention magazines and newspapers and then add something like “Last year I also read a good book; it was called ‘such and such.’” In sum, the responses to my questions about the amount and kind of outside reading done suggest that for the most part students in basic writing courses do not engage in extensive, sustained reading of demanding prose.

The rest of the questionnaire pertained to the students’ revising habits. The question asking them whether or not they reread their drafts aloud when revising met with a 50-50 response; that is, 21% circled “always,” 21% circled “never,” and 58% circled “sometimes.” However, their responses to related questions revealed that if in fact they *do* read aloud, they are probably not doing so in the way I meant — with an ear attuned to their style. That is to say, a 65% majority, when questioned about the number of drafts they usually write, indicated that they write two or fewer. Furthermore, nearly all of the students responded to the question about the kinds of changes they make when they revise by indicating that they concentrate on correcting surface-level errors. Since most of them, apparently, immediately go to work hunting for spelling, punctuation, and grammar errors, they doubtless do not go through a stage of revision in which they read over their writing listening to the rhythm and fluency of their prose. In fact, I suspect that many of them circled “always” in answer to my question about reading their drafts aloud for the same reason many circled “yes” to my question about pleasure reading: because they thought it was the answer I wanted.

Given the unreliability of the students’ responses, I was unable to find positive correlations a.) between reading proficiency and the revision habit of reading aloud and b.) between reading proficiency and high scores on the final writing sample. My analysis and interpretation of the students’ responses to the initial questionnaire did, however, allow me to draw the conclusion that basic writers tend not to be strong readers and tend not to be in the habit of reading over their essay drafts with an ear attuned to their own prose style.

Table 1: General Results of Questionnaire Concerning Students' Reading and Revising Habits

1. Do you frequently do non-required or pleasure reading?

Yes	No
84%	16%

2. Describe the amount and frequency of the non-required reading you do, in terms of minutes per day or per week.

71% read less than 30 minutes per day.

3. Describe the kinds of materials you read for extracurricular reading (types of books, magazines, newspapers, etc.).

73% of the genres mentioned were newspapers and popular magazines; only a few students mentioned novels or other kinds of books.

4. As you revise an essay, do you read aloud what you have written?

Never	Sometimes	Always
21%	58%	21%

5. When you are assigned an essay to write, how many drafts (revisions) do you usually write?

65% stated two or fewer drafts.
33% stated approximately three drafts.
2% stated approximately four drafts.

6. What kinds of changes do you usually make with each revision (content? organization? sentence structure? spelling? punctuation? or what?)?

Descriptions were too varied to tally, but very few students mentioned stylistic changes. Several claimed to correct spelling and punctuation first and then to add or delete details and find better words.

The findings of the comparison of the control group to the experimental group were more definitive. The students in the control

group on average did less revising aloud and received lower final writing sample scores than the students in the experimental group. (See Table 2.) Students' written statements submitted with their essays throughout the quarter (and I regard these assessments as more reliable than their answers to their revising habits on the questionnaire because I did not explain what I meant by "reading aloud" until after they had filled out the questionnaire) indicated that on average only 47% of the control group students revised any given essay aloud, while 68% of the experimental group did so. And, with 12 the highest score possible on the writing sample (that is, if all three scorers gave an essay a score of 4) and 3 the lowest score possible (if all scorers gave a score of 1), the average for the control group was 8.5, while the average for the experimental group was 9.1.

Table 2: Comparison of Performances of Control Group and Experimental Group

	Control	Experimental
Average number of students that revised an essay aloud	47%	68%
Average score for stylistic/mechanical proficiency on final writing sample (with 12 being highest possible and 3 lowest possible)	8.5	9.1

Stage Four: One-on-one Observations of Students Revising

For the next phase of my experiment I decided to observe students one-on-one so as to gain further insights into the relationship between revision habits and prose style. In the winter and spring quarters of 1996, each time an essay assignment was turned in I selected a few students to come individually to my office to read their essay aloud and make any changes they saw fit as a result of this exercise. I chose only students who, in response to my questioning, indicated that they had revised and edited their essays as best they could before turning them in. I excluded students who indicated that they had not had time to polish their essays because I wanted to ensure that the *reading aloud*

and not merely the extra time was the significant factor in any improvements students would make in their essays.

When the student arrived at my office, I explained to him or her that I was conducting an experiment to try to determine whether writers catch stylistic, grammatical, and mechanical problems more easily if they read their writing aloud. I instructed the student to read his or her essay aloud, stopping to correct any grammatical or mechanical errors detected in the process and to recast any sentences found to be awkward. I also asked the student to — as much as possible — think out loud. For example, if a construction sounded wrong or awkward, the student was to voice aloud this judgment and to verbalize his or her various attempts at recasting the construction before writing down the revision finally settled on.

The student was given approximately 25 minutes to complete this exercise. Meanwhile, I sat at a nearby desk with a copy of the paper, jotting down in the margins the remarks and oral recastings of constructions the student made at various points in the essay. Later, when I analyzed the results, I considered both the changes the student made on his or her copy and the student's oral remarks I had recorded on my copy.

Results and Findings of One-on-one Experiment

The results of this experiment led me to the following broad conclusion: reading aloud appears to help the better basic writer hear problems with style he or she would not otherwise detect, but does not appear to make a significant difference in the detection of localized grammatical and mechanical errors. To be more specific, the same student who would note his or her mixed constructions, faulty parallelism, choppieness, or excessive subordination would often not note his or her subject-verb agreement errors, missing final *-s*'s on plural nouns, and careless omissions of words. With many of these students, what reading researcher K.S. Goodman has called miscue reading appears to be at work: that is, the student supplies the correction as he or she reads and does not notice that something different is actually written on the page. With other students, the cause seems to be dialect interference: that is, because in their spoken dialect it is customary, for example, to leave off the *-s* sound on a plural or a possessive noun or the *-d* sound on a past participle, they do not perceive this omission in their writing as an error. But, interestingly, these same students can detect many of their awkward sentence constructions. The approach I had them take of voicing their thoughts aloud revealed that they can hear when a sentence sounds "off" even if they can't always recast it to their complete satisfaction.

Let me repeat that the above description pertains to my *better* basic writing students. Another conclusion my experiment seems to point to is that the very *weakest* writers – my D and F students – cannot detect even their stylistic problems when they read aloud. In other words, for these students, reading their work aloud seems not to yield any benefits. One reason for this is that many of them have such difficulty reading that they stumble and stall and continually have to go back and start a sentence again; consequently, they do not hear their sentences as wholes and therefore cannot judge if there are structural problems with them. But what I think is probably the more significant reason weak students are unable to detect stylistic problems when they read their writing aloud is that they generally tend to be non-readers. These are the students who do virtually no extracurricular reading (I informally questioned students about their reading habits when they came to my office) and so have not developed an ear for effective and acceptable prose style. When I had these students read their papers aloud, they would plough through tangled or bloated sentences as though these sentences made perfect sense. When I would have them reread to me a particularly bad sentence and ask them if they could hear a problem with it, such students usually insisted that it sounded okay to them. Similarly, I've noticed that on other occasions when I've had a class critique an anonymous student's essay, the weak students often claim they do not hear anything wrong with awkward sentences that the stronger students point out.

Overall Findings and Pedagogical Implications of This Study

This study has explored and raised a number of questions:

- 1) Are better writers usually better readers? In other words, is there a correlation between mature, pleasing prose style and the quantity and quality of what a person reads?
- 2) Do those with a superior prose style tend to read their drafts aloud as they revise to a greater extent than do those whose writing is less fluent and less pleasing?
- 3) All other things being equal (that is, reading ability and quality and quantity of extracurricular reading), do students who read their work aloud as they revise possess writing styles that are superior to those of their counterparts who do not read aloud? In other words, is reading aloud the determining factor – or even a significant factor – in the achievement of superior prose style?
- 4) For the average to above-average student writer, will prose style improve if the student develops the habit of reading aloud as he or she revises?

These questions need to be more fully explored. In particular, more advanced writers (advanced freshman writers as well as experienced adult writers) need to be observed in the writing process and to be questioned as to whether, and to what extent, they read their drafts aloud as they revise. Such investigation may reveal whether it is aural rereading or whether it is some other cognitive or behavioral factor that enables stylistically skilled writers to detect the infelicities of their prose when they are revising.

Although much investigation still needs to be done into the particulars of the connections among reading, writing, and prose style, my study does suggest that there are such connections and thereby points to certain pedagogical implications. It would appear from the results of my questionnaire that students in basic writing classes are poor writers in good part because they read very little and read very little quality prose; we therefore cannot hope to improve the writing of these students without helping them to become better readers. Unfortunately, however, many basic writing courses contain very little reading because the teachers know what a hard time students have writing and therefore do not want to overload them with reading assignments as well. Somehow, though—perhaps via a parallel required reading course, required attendance at a reading lab, or some other method—students in basic writing courses need simultaneously to be working on becoming better readers.

In addition, students in basic writing courses should be taught to go through more than two revisions of an essay and not to jump from the rough draft stage to the editing stage. The teacher could demonstrate the stylistic revision stage, showing how to read and reread the later drafts listening to the *sound* of one's prose. And the teacher should make clear the difference between doing this and proofreading for surface errors, which is a later activity and something that is perhaps better done with a careful eye than a careful ear.

In conjunction with training our students to read their work aloud to detect stylistic flaws, we should actually teach style, so that when they do notice awkward constructions, they will be equipped to analyze the cause of the problem and have at their command various structural options for revision. However, teachers tend to shy away from teaching style in basic writing courses. I have heard basic writing teachers dismiss style as something students will eventually be taught in English 101. The rationale is that there is too much else to cover in basic writing—namely thesis support, organization, and, above all, grammar and avoidance of error—and that teaching style is appropriate only for students who already know how to write a grammatically correct sentence. But I disagree. I think many students become enthused about writing *only* when they have developed a feel for style and the possibilities of manipulating sentence structures and sentence

rhythms. It was an appreciation of style that motivated the student William, discussed earlier, to want to write and to want to improve his writing. Students can be introduced to style in a variety of ways, including listening to the teacher read aloud stylistically pleasing and powerful passages from literature; analyzing the factors that contribute to a style they find pleasing—for example that of Martin Luther King; being taught sentence variety options; working on sentence-combining exercises; and so on. Once students acquire a feel for style and for the possibilities of developing their own, many will be motivated to master otherwise boring points about grammar and punctuation. I witnessed this phenomenon firsthand with William, who worked hard to understand such concepts as dangling participles, conjunctive adverbs, restrictive versus non-restrictive clauses, and so on, once he saw how this understanding would help him achieve his goal of a clear, powerful prose style. I think that many basic writing students are like William and that in order to motivate them we need to help them see the connections among reading and writing and style. In conclusion, we can do this by helping them to become better readers, by training them to go through a stylistic revision stage in which they read their drafts aloud, and by introducing them to the elements of a pleasing prose style.

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