The Grape Dimetapp™ Effect: Revising the "Revision as Medicine" Metaphor

Moria Torrington

Revision is a process that writers sometimes feel is a "necessary evil." In this article, Torrington explains how seeing and enacting revision through a Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) perspective can make the process more useful and, ultimately, less painful for writers who want to improve their texts in any genre.

I once wrote that revision, to me, was Grape Dimetapp: it tastes horrible, but it's good for you, so you should just suck it up because in the long run, you'll be better for doing it.

I was young when I wrote that—not young enough to actually still be taking Dimetapp (which, for those of you who haven't had the pleasure, is a nasty children's cough medicine), but young enough to think I had come up with a brilliant metaphor. And I believed the sentiment so much that after each text I wrote, I forced myself to revise, carefully combing my writing for omitted commas, typos, and misplaced words. As I began to write different kinds of texts more often, I noticed that I could revise other things to improve my writing. I began to play with formats, organizations, phrasings, and the way I developed my ideas. I established a kind of two-step process for my own revisions; after I was finished drafting, I'd look at big-picture stuff like organization, paragraph development, and support first and then turn to proofreading or editing issues. In the process, I began to understand that revision is so much more than just "fixing" commas and words—it's a writer's chance to put his or her best foot forward in the text and to make sure that

the composition they're putting out there (wherever "there" happens to be) is the best it can be.

But the problem with this expanded notion of revision is that it still assumes that we must take our medicine—or, that our writing is "sick" and we must make it "healthy" by reviewing, re-examining, or rewriting it.[1] This definition fails to take into account all the ways that writers go about using and acting out the process in relation to their own work; in other words, this view of revision doesn't allow for an understanding of the fact that revision varies from writer to writer and text to text. Think about it this way:

1. Writers tend to use revision at all stages of their writing processes (in the middle of writing their text, for example).

2. Writers go about revising in all kinds of different ways (highlighting, making notes in the margins, using sticky notes, crossing and uncrossing out things, cutting/pasting text, and drawing attention to questionable parts of their compositions by putting the text in bold or in red, just to name a few).

3. Writers get help with revision from all kinds of places (their friends, family, peers, professors, their own ideas of what they think they're trying to do when they're writing in particular genres).

4. Writers revise many different parts of their compositions (from things like words, which can help make meaning clearer, to things like font type, which affect the look of the text on the page and therefore what genre the composition looks like).

When we think about revision this way, it becomes easier to see why it might be important and how it can help us during our own writing processes. But in order for revision to be as helpful as it could be, we need to think of it as more than just the step that comes after writing. In fact, I would argue that we all revise at some point or another during our composing processes. You might not give the text a "twice-over" (or even a "once-over") before sending it out into the world, but I'd bet at some point you've written a sentence, phrase, or word only to delete it two seconds later. Or started with one title and changed it two or three times while writing. In any case, the process isn't as clear or straightforward as we might think, and if we're going to start revising smarter, we (as writers) need to consider how exactly a complex notion of revision could improve our ability to communicate through writing.

One way we could achieve this notion is to take into account how the way that we revise is often inherently connected to the genre we're writing in.

For example, deleting an autocorrected word in a text message is technically an instance of revision, because the writer is making changes to the text to improve communication. Yet the way that we revise text messages is very different from the way we would revise research essays, which might involve doing more research to better support our argument and making sure our sources are appropriately credited throughout the text. These two revision processes are different still from the way we would revise a résumé, which is very different from the way we would revise a PowerPoint presentation, which is very different from the way we would revise a novel or a short story, which is very different from the way we would revise—well, you get the idea.

So how do we know how to revise a text we've composed? Well, it depends on both the genre and the way that the genre is situated within a cultural-historical moment. We may have an idea of what a genre looks like based on our research and our consideration of sample texts, and we can certainly revise with those things in mind, but reflecting on the context surrounding the genre will help us develop a fuller picture of the factors we need to take into account to get our message across in the clearest way possible. Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)[2] becomes important here. CHAT gives us a way of looking at our composing process that shows us how, when, why, and for what reason we compose and revise the way that we do. A writer with a CHAT-focused idea of revision would especially want to keep in mind the representation, socialization, and reception aspects of the theory.[3] Representation shows us the ideas we have about the genre we're writing in and where those ideas come from, while socialization and reception focus on the ways that we compose according to our already-set ideas of writing as well as our ideas about how our audience might interpret or use our texts. An approach to revising our texts with CHAT components in mind could help us think of the process in terms of making the most appropriate and effective choices for us, our audience, and the genre, rather than as "fixing" what's "broken" in our writing.

But what might a CHAT/genre approach to revision look like, and how exactly would it help our writing? Well, let's take as an example my cousin Cameron. Cameron is studying to become a marketing executive for a film company, and in order to do so, he must learn (and become really good at writing) the genres related to the field of business. Knowing that he's trying to break into a particular field by learning how to write in that field makes him especially aware of his revision process. But even with a clear idea of the genre he's writing and it what the purpose of his assignment is, his revision process can be complicated.

Here's one of his first major assignments for an upper-level Business Communications course:

ASSIGNMENT #1: Informative Document

Write an email, letter, or memo in which you explain something -- summarize a problem, outline a procedure, detail a process -- for readers unfamiliar with your topic. Your audience should be peers and/or subordinates.

Remember: you're *informing* and *explaining*, not persuading; this is a statement of facts, not opinions.

And his first draft of this assignment began this way (reviewer comments in *italics*):

How to buy a car?

Buying a car is ~~a huge~~ *an important* financial investment, so it is no wonder ~~that~~ people spend a large portion of time in the car buying process. The first step in the car buying process is research. When making a ~~large~~ *significant* purchase most people want to make sure they are getting the best they can afford so they look to reviews. There are many different sources where you can obtain information about a car including previous owner reviews and professional reviews (Car & Driver, and Consumer reports). *Why did you cite someone?!*

A couple things are clear from this piece of his draft; even though Cameron knew from the assignment sheet that the genre he was supposed to be writing in was either email, letter, or memo, his idea of what writing in school should look like—based on his socialization (that tells him what he should do in school papers) and his representation of the genre (as a paper for class)—made his first draft look more like an essay. He has a title and a main point that directly states what his paper is about, which are elements of essay writing that most of us learn during our primary or secondary writing education. The reviewer mostly reinforces the idea that this is a school paper, suggesting some changes that make his tone more formal (like it would be in a school paper) and help him sound less like he's talking to someone (like you might see in an email). However, the reviewer also questions why he would cite a fact, which suggests that on some level he or she knows the genre isn't necessarily supposed to look like "school writing," where you always cite sources in MLA, APA, or Chicago style.

From here, Cameron went back to his piece and did a second overall revision. At this point, he got feedback from a different friend. Here is the second draft with comments from the friend in *italics* and the call-out box:

How to buy a car?

Buying a car is an important financial investment to most people. It is also a very stressful time *to do so*, ~~not just from the financial aspect but~~ *both financially and* because consumers want to make the right choice and not end up with a lemon. I recently purchased my first car and employed the following steps to help me choose the right car for me.

First, you need to identify the need for a new car. Since purchasing a car is an important financial investment, you are not going to buy one if it is not necessary. After you have decided a new car is necessary, you *should* begin the research process. Most people look to get the best vehicle that they can afford, *and* to figure this out, they turn to reviews.

The second reviewer is able to recognize some aspects of Cameron's draft that might affect how it's received and interpreted by his target audience; he or she notes that emails and letters don't have titles, and that he should probably change his format so it looks like what the teacher wants. This reviewer also focuses on tone and grammar because he or she has an idea of what business writing is supposed to look like. Yet this representation doesn't take into account the audience specified in the assignment sheet. In other words, this reviewer seems to think that the "real" audience here is Cameron's teacher, which reflects a misunderstanding that stems from socialization, as the reviewer knows this is a school assignment and therefore thinks it should meet the conventions of grammar, style, and language that we typically see in school writing. Furthermore, his or her suggestions and comments don't have anything to do with helping the author fulfill the purpose of the assignment, which was to write an informative document that tells an uninformed reader what they need to know about buying a car; this oversight can happen when we don't consider the reception of our texts—how they will be received and used in the real world. If Cameron and the reviewer had thought about representation, socialization, and reception at this stage in the revision process, they might have realized that business genres have uses in the real world; they're not always just for teachers.

Cameron's (and the reviewers') misrepresentation of the genre and misunderstanding of reception are really clear when you look at the professor's comments (in *italics*) on the final draft:

Date?

Address?

John,

Buying a car is an important financial investment to most people. ~~It is~~ *It's* also a ~~very~~ stressful time to do so *[do what?]*, both financially and because consumers want to make the right choice and not end up with a lemon. I recently purchased my first car and employed the following steps to help me choose the right car for me. *[Okay. But why don't you tell him—since this is supposed to be for and about him—that following these steps will help him choose the right car for him? AUDIENCE-ORIENTED, Cameron. Not Cameron-oriented.]*

IDENTIFY THE NEED [If these are "steps," could you list them? And give them headers?]

First, you have to identify the need for a new car. Since purchasing a car is a financial burden, ~~you are~~ *you're* not going to buy one if ~~it is~~ *it's* not necessary. *[Are you sure?]* After ~~you have~~ *you've* decided a new car is necessary, you should begin the research process. *[Is that all you have on identifying the need? If so, is that really worthy of a full step?]*

The professor's comments—especially where he reminds Cameron that the piece should not only follow a certain format, but also must be focused on the reader—show how Cameron's revision process and the reviewers' comments were too narrowly focused. Think about what letters (the genre he ended up choosing) look like: are they concerned more with grammar or more with content? What do they do for their readers? Do they have formal or informal tones? Are contractions okay—even expected—in this genre?

By looking at Cameron's revision process overall, we can see that the reviewers' comments seem to stem from a misunderstanding of the genre and a failure to account for all the factors that might affect what Cameron's final draft looks like; while their changes to tone and word choice improve Cameron's sentence structure, they don't help as much as they could if the reviewers had reflected on the audience, purpose, and genre of the assignment as those aspects played out in the draft. Cameron's own changes show the same kind of misunderstanding. He takes the reviewers suggestions to change phrasing and punctuation because he knows he's writing for school and has been socialized to understand that in school, we write in standard English. But he could have improved his communication in this assignment overall if he had considered all of the complexities of representation, socialization, and reception in relation to the genre and the field he was being asked to write in. Ultimately, all of these considerations can happen during the revision

process; that is, thinking about CHAT components can help us make our compositions look more like the genre we're trying to achieve if we pause to evaluate how they're affecting our texts once we have a rough draft—whether that draft consists of a sentence, paragraph, outline, diagram, map, full text, or list of brainstormed ideas.

I use Cameron as an example here not because I want to recommend that writers begin to revise their own compositions in any set way; each writer has their own way of revising that works for them, and this process can change from text to text, situation to situation, or even draft to draft. I'm also not trying to convince writers to love revision as much as I do (and I really do love it—have I mentioned that yet?). What I think we can learn from Cameron's process is that we should think about revision in more complex ways, in ways that consider the cultural, historic context of the genre, so that it can become more useful to us as writers. By putting aside the medicine metaphors and beginning to consider the complexities of revision, we could review and re-examine our texts in productive (rather than painful) ways.

Endnotes

1. Which, according to the Oxford English Dictionary is the primary definition of "revision."

2. My understanding of this concept comes from (among other places) Joyce Walker's 2010 GWRJ article "Just CHATing." The seven elements of CHAT she outlines there (and the three I focus on here) not only help us understand the how/what/when/why of composition, but also help us think through the reasons for and uses of revision.

3. Though all seven aspects of CHAT could potentially affect the way our texts look and thus, help us revise smarter.

Moria Torrington is an English Studies Ph.D. student specializing in Rhetoric & Composition. In addition to Writing Studies and Writing Research, her interests include parody, pop culture, poetry, and plaid. She hopes one day to be able to teach a course on the rhetoric of *South Park*.