

Revision Strategies

A Brief Overview of Revision Strategies

This guide describes techniques you might use to revise short, in-class exercises into longer pieces. As you've likely experienced throughout your life, writing is a recursive process; you may brainstorm, prewrite, come up with new ideas during your prewrite, then brainstorm some more—and that's just in the beginning of your relationship with the piece you'll eventually create. What can be tricky in a creative writing class is discerning which short exercises might be worth revising into longer, more serious pieces, and how to go about developing a piece of writing from an informal exercise.

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Take Stock of What You've Written

The first step to revising an in-class exercise into a longer piece is to choose the bit of writing you'll develop. To do that, try these strategies:

Make Stacks

Read quickly through each of your in-class writings, making three separate stacks from them: those writings you like just as they are, those you like but aren't quite sure what to do with, and those you do not like at all. Then, focus on reading carefully through the piles of writing you like (you can ignore the writing you don't like—unless you think there might be some hidden gems worth mining). As you read, ask yourself these kinds of questions:

- What images, ideas, phrases, descriptions, dialogue, characters seem to “pop” off the page? Underline them.
- What memories, images, flashes of story, characters, or dialogue do these short pieces prompt you to think of? Jot them down.

Seek Feedback

Choose your favorite in-class writings and give them to a friend, family member, or writing consultant. Which does the reader like best, and why? What exactly does the reader like about that piece?

Seek feedback from others about your revisions.

Find a Way Into the Text

Now that you've got an in-class exercise that you wish to develop further, use these prompts to discern the direction you might take with the piece:

- Is the writing best suited for prose or poetry? Why?
- What are the central components of the piece that you think should take center stage in a longer piece? That is, do you want the bit of dialogue to begin the story? Do you want a particular image to open the poem? Is there a theme—a philosophical moment or realization—that you want to emerge at the end of the piece?

- Self-assignments: in addition to identifying strengths in your in-class writing, take note of what you haven't done yet, or don't usually like. If you always write in the first-person, for instance, challenge yourself to write in third.
- If you're starting with a character sketch: what does she want? What does he believe? For an instant plot, put an obstacle between the character and her desire, or place him in a situation that will test his beliefs and code of behavior.
- If you're starting with a piece of dialogue, weave in elements of minute action: someone changing a tire, or making a sandwich. The idea isn't to create an action scene out of a conversation, but to start illuminating the speakers and to give you additional material to work with.
- If you have a setting sketch, fill it chock-full of objects that both reveal information and can be used later. Put a vase on a table so we know someone likes pretty things, but also so it can be thrown and broken.
- Getting off topic: let your writing wander. If nothing in your poem seems surprising or unexpected to you, it will probably also seem dull to your reader.
- Start or stay concrete and specific: if you're starting with an image of a tree, don't let that great line become a poem about a generic, abstract idea of trees.
- For poetry, play with language. Experiment with metaphor, unusual word combinations, assonance and alliteration.
- For poetry, think of the line as a unit. Try to match that rhythm consistently throughout the piece. Just as other types of writing have central images, the poem has a central rhythm.

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Be Bold and Experiment

Especially in the early stages of a piece, don't be afraid to write too much or too randomly. If you were packing for a trip but didn't know the destination, you'd put both sweater and shorts in your suitcase. If, three drafts and a workshop later, you find out the story ends up in Florida, you can delete the sweater. But for now, throw it all in. You don't know what will be useful.

Don't be afraid of bad endings or rushed action or a line that's not right. That's normal, and it's normal to show up to workshop with an awkward ending. Just take the plunge and do something. It's easier for your readers to identify strengths and weaknesses in what's actually on the page rather than guessing at what you might eventually do.