

## On Second Thought: Re Revising

Bruce G. Carruthers\* 

Department of Sociology, Northwestern University (United States)

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### Abstract

Revision involves the re-consideration of prose, either in light of an author's changed perspective or reviewers' comments. Use of text editing software makes revision a more nearly continuous process that still requires breaks and an instrumental attitude toward one's own prose. Revision can also induce de facto co-authorship as reviewer's recommendations are incorporated.

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\*  [b-carruthers@northwestern.edu](mailto:b-carruthers@northwestern.edu)

To “revise” is to re-examine and make alterations to written material; literally it is to revision. It includes the process whereby authors re-visit their own arguments, but it is also a distinctive phase in the formal publication process. Let me consider these two separately, starting with the first and drawing on my own experience.

As you will see from reading this, nothing that I have ever written, or ever will write, is perfect. Far, far from it. It can all be improved, and so potentially I could revise forever, progressing towards perfection but never achieving it (Zeno’s paradox for writers). But my need for revision is even more basic, because putting my ideas into writing is in large measure how I think. It isn’t so much that I form thoughts in my mind and then find a way to express them using external media. Rather, expressing them is how I think my thoughts, and revision is how I re-think them once I’ve learned what my thoughts look like. So in effect I perform a personal and usually iterative form of distributed cognition that involves my brain, fingers, books, software, computer screen, and/or printed page. And I always have second thoughts (and third, and fourth, and so on). It would be nice to imagine that revision brings progress, and sometimes it does, but occasionally I digress (and regress). At times, I have written myself into a dead end, for example, and can only escape by reversing direction and backing out. And, of course, to be “revisionist” is to end badly.

At the very start of my career, revision was costly and involved manually retyping a paper manuscript (thank god I didn’t live before the invention of the typewriter). In that era, I and everyone else would “think hard” before modifying their prose. My college essays went through two complete drafts, maximum, because of how much time and effort retyping a clean copy required. Does anyone else remember Liquid Paper? Now, endless tinkering is facilitated by text editing software that spell-checks, auto-completes, offers menus of synonyms and antonyms (and fonts), and evaluates grammar. It can even translate into other languages, if one wishes to provide to readers the *frisson* of multilingual prose, or the scholarly patina of a dead language, *i.e., et cetera*. Such toys invite further play, but this potentially infinite process usually stops when I decide that what I have fashioned is now “good enough,” or when I face a hard deadline imposed by someone else. And the “good enough” standard is best gauged after a suitable pause: a break in which I stop writing and stop thinking about my argument. After that break (which can range from a day or two to several months), I bring a pair of fresh eyes to my own argument and often see flaws and gaps that had previously escaped me. Showing prose to a friendly reader can also produce sage advice (fortunately, I’m married to one and so can always access my in-house critic). There is a final set of revisions, and then I’m ready for the next phase.

Time gives me a bit of distance and affords a more critical perspective on my own prose. It is always tempting to view writing as a deeply personal form of expression, wherein one’s most beautiful and insightful thoughts are laid out on the page. Words that become like adorable children are impossible not to love, just as they are. But such adoration gets in the way of revision, because it prevents authors from recognizing all the *non sequiturs*, tangents, mixed metaphors, verbiages, awkward transitions, and excessive detail in their arguments. One might, for example, be excessively fond of long lists. Authors should be ruthless about their own prose: if it doesn’t work, fix it, replace it, or ditch it. Don’t treat your words like beloved family members. Be instrumental.

After authors have finished writing and rewriting, they usually try to publish, and so a second form of revision occurs. I have a few old manuscripts mouldering in my desk, but mostly I attempt to get things published somewhere. After all, my annual raise depends on it. But to enter into the formal publication process is, in effect, to invite someone else to help revise the paper. With a proper double-blind peer review process, neither I nor any other author gets

to pick their new co-authors (the journal or press editor does), but these people will play a key role in the revision process. Reviewers read the written analysis and offer feedback. Sometimes their comments are useful, and sometimes they are ill-informed. Sometimes they are so stupid that you wonder if the reviewer actually read your paper. But you are stuck with them because their judgment of your writing, communicated to the editor and later to you, determines your chances of publication. And if you survive the reviewing process and eventually pass muster, your reviewers' fingerprints will be all over the footnotes you included, the citations and caveats you added, the analyses you conducted, and sometimes even the conclusions that you drew. You may suspect that they forced you to cite their own work ("Carruthers 1996 is obviously relevant here"), or made you criticize their enemies ("The limitations of Carruthers 1996 have long been obvious"). Ritually, one thanks anonymous reviewers even if the revisions they imposed feel to you like base compromises and cheap concessions. Your name is on the publication, after all, but standing beside you are the invisible co-authors who were foisted on you by an editor. You may never know who they were, and sometimes it is better that way.

Peer reviewers seldom think your initial submission is perfect. That is, they will typically indicate to editors a number of ways in which your argument can be improved. They may also believe your paper to be so flawed as to be unsalvageable, in which case they recommend rejection. If you are rejected outright, then a post-mortem is advisable: were any of the reviewers' comments useful? Did reviewers identify critical flaws? Are there new literatures you can productively engage? Is there a better way to manage readers' expectations so that they perceive your findings to be insightful, as opposed to merely obvious? Is your case study, lovingly elaborated in such detail, really necessary after all? Answers to these questions can provide a road map for revision, and then one sends the manuscript to a different venue. Hopefully, you won't run into the same unhappy reviewers again, but it happens. Particularly if your argument fits into a well-defined academic niche or stream of research, then quite likely you will run into the same reviewers multiple times. If you find yourself confronting hostile responses over and over, then it makes sense to reframe your argument substantially enough that editors will deem a different group to be the relevant judges. Either that, or put your manuscript back in your desk and forget about it.

Suppose, however, that the editor invites you to revise-and-resubmit your manuscript. Then it is your job to surmount the reviewers' concerns and change for the better their assessment of your work. Different reviewers may push you in different directions ("cut section 3" vs. "elaborate section 3"), but editors will sometimes offer guidance for how to reconcile conflicting advice. Otherwise, you are on your own. Whatever the recommendations, it is important to make (or at least to appear to make) a "good faith effort" in your revisions. If you think that the reviewers were complete idiots, kindly keep that opinion to yourself. Calm yourself down, let your indignation subside, and see if there isn't a way to be responsive even to foolish comments. If some of their suggestions are unreasonable or infeasible, explain to the editor why you will not, or cannot, follow their advice, in as respectful a manner as you can manage. If possible, ensure that your response mixes some compliance with your defiance. In other words, pick your battles and avoid playing chicken games with reviewers.

Once your revisions have satisfied the reviewers and the editor, and your manuscript is accepted for publication, your writing is back in your hands. Take another break, then look at your prose again. It won't be perfect, but is it now good enough? If yes, then the time has arrived to send it off to the publisher and be done with it. On rare occasions (like the second edition of a book), you may have the opportunity to revise something you wrote years ago. But mostly, publications simply age in place. And if we wish to revise our thinking on some topic,

we will use a fresh piece of writing to make a new or updated statement, rather than fiddling with old prose. Most people prefer not to recant in public or otherwise explicitly criticize their earlier formulations, but if you have really changed your mind about something, or possess a very different perspective, then it is best to be up front about it. There is no shame in admitting you've learned something and have revised your thinking.

And now, because I have revised this paper several times, received the advice of a friendly reader, and followed my own advice about the importance of pauses, I declare it "good enough." Done.

**Bruce G. Carruthers** – Department of Sociology, Northwestern University (United States)

📄 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2703-3107>

✉ [b-carruthers@northwestern.edu](mailto:b-carruthers@northwestern.edu); 🌐 <https://sociology.northwestern.edu/people/faculty/core/bruce-carruthers.html>

Bruce G. Carruthers is the John D. MacArthur Professor of Sociology at Northwestern University and Long-term Fellow at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study. He works in the areas of economic sociology and comparative-historical sociology, with research funding from the National Science Foundation, the American Bar Foundation, the Russell Sage Foundation, the Institute for New Economic Thinking, and the Tobin Project. His latest book is entitled *The Economy of Promises: Trust, Power, and Credit in America* (Princeton University Press, 2022).