

A Review of *Rewriting: How to do Things with Texts*

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Abstract

Rewriting: How to do things with texts, by Joseph Harris, advises students, teachers, and writing professionals about the incorporation of outside sources, or voices, into academic student writing. According to Harris, the focus of his book is not just an act of writing a paper again; it involves pushing students' own learning and writing further. Concepts of "moves" (specific suggestions Harris provides for this type of rewriting) guide his organizational choices as he discusses one revision "move" in each chapter. This text fills a gap in the professional literature concerning revision because currently, according to Harris, there is little scholarship on "how to do it" (p. 7). While Harris does not cover all aspects of revision, he does provide a supplemental voice in the conversation regarding the teaching of the writing process.

Rewriting: How to do things with texts, by Joseph Harris (2006), advises students, teachers, and writing professionals about how to revise essays in a concrete and specific way that Harris terms "moves." In particular, Harris offers students and readers ways to revise their papers by including a more balanced discussion of evidence and sources that did not appear in their original work.

Harris is quick to point out in his introduction that the concept of revision is discussed by several well-known writers, including Donald Murray (2000) and Peter Elbow (1999); however, Harris (2006) explains that "while there has been much talk about the importance of revision, there has been little substantive advice on how to do it" (p. 7). This concept is similar to Lester Faigley's (1989) discussions in his article, "Judging Writing, Judging Ourselves." Faigley identifies numerous conversations regarding the necessity of good writing but illustrates that there is little agreement concerning what makes up the concept of good writing or how exactly to do it. According to Harris, scholars have written little to succinctly express to students how to go about revising, and he worries that students may be missing out on needed suggestions for the act of revising. For example, many teachers express their wishes to students as, "'think critically' or 'take risks' or 'approach revision as re-vision'" (p. 3); however, the actual discussions of how to do these actions may be missing. Revision as rewriting can provide some of these suggestions.

The need for students to participate in the larger conversations around subject matters helps writers creating more intellectual prose, but this becomes difficult in a "culture

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prone to naming winners and losers, rights and wrongs. You are in or out, hot or not, on the bus or off it. But academics seldom write in an all-or-nothing mode” (p. 26). Harris describes the win-lose style of academic writing that appears in many college classrooms; academic writing is often termed as a debate-style product, where students are encouraged to defend their viewpoints in a pro versus con mentality. However, true academic writing, according to Harris, reflects an inquiry, an examination of further or other possibilities that exist beyond a simple pro-con representation, and Harris explains how to write in this manner: “you need to push beyond the sorts of bipolar oppositions that frame most of the arguments found on editorial pages and TV talk shows” (p. 26). This type of suggestion (helpful yet not prescriptive or overly directive) is found throughout the entire text. Ultimately, his main advice to readers is to think about rewriting as a way “to add to what has already been said...to rethink and reinterpret the texts he or she is dealing with” (p. 2). As a college writing instructor, I can appreciate this move; too often students are locked into a restricted win/lose view of academic writing. Harris further illustrates his own idea of voices adding to an author’s text; each chapter contains multiple “intertexts,” which are small graphics with citation references to outside materials addressed nearby in the text. These intertexts reinforce the practice of adding voices to the author’s document. These illustrations are effective; essentially, Harris is reflecting and modeling the practice.

Harris splits his text concerning rewriting into five main chapters and a concluding afterword. The five chapters reflect five main “moves” Harris illustrates as necessary for students to understand and practice the concept of rewriting, an important element of academic discourse. All five moves focus on the necessity of incorporating outside voices into a student’s own writings, and Harris explains how each move creates needed elements found in rewriting. While the moves are not expected to be linear, nor does Harris present them only as an ordered process, they do seem to follow a logical organization of thought. Each chapter contains project sections, appearing as graphics that illustrate how teachers can implement the particular “move” discussed in the chapter. The first three moves involve “marking out your words and ideas from those of the texts you are working with” (p. 74), including the use of indentations and quotations.

The first move, titled *Coming to Terms*, concerns itself with “representing the work of others in ways that are both fair to them and useful to your own aims in writing. In a sense, this is rewriting in its clearest form” (p. 5). Instead of only filling up space in an essay with another writer’s words, students need to be choosy with outside material. Outside voices should serve a purpose, and they need to be pushed further through the use of students’ own purposes. Summarize the material when necessary, Harris says, and utilize other voices to help propel your project. Writing instructors may be pleased to see outside material correctly summarized and serving a purpose in a paper (besides filling up the page requirement). The second move, *Forwarding*, relates directly to the first by building on the skills learned in *Coming to Terms*. *Forwarding*, which is connected via analogy to the forwarding of an e-mail, represents how writers can incorporate learned viewpoints from another voice in the conversation and advance that voice into a different situation or project. Because academic writing rarely involves writing directly to other conversation members “...you are less entering into conversation with him (whoever he

may have been) than with fellow readers of his work...You are recirculating his writing” (p. 37). In addition to *Forwarding*, writers frequently participate in the third move, *Countering*. *Countering* represents a writer attempting to “suggest a different way of thinking” as opposed to attempting to “nullify” a writing (p. 57). This move allows students to incorporate other voices into their own writing in a way that continues the conversation instead of engaging in a win/lose debate situation. The debate situation has a tendency to “cancel out” instead of add to the conversation (p. 61).

The fourth move, *Taking an Approach* is segregated partially from the first three moves. However, the fourth move involves “working in the mode of another writer” (p. 75), so the main ideas of one work are applied to a different approach or project than originally intended by the author. While the fourth move does require writers to fully understand the concepts and theoretical backgrounds behind the original work, the writers are not just adding the voice to the conversation; instead, writers attempt to apply the original work in a unique manner.

The fifth and final move involves a return through the first four moves in an act of *Revising*. In this section, Harris distinguishes between revising and editing and explains to readers the difference between these two writing stages through several examples of student writings with responses. These samples illustrate how students can incorporate the prior four moves within drafts. Writers revisit the prior moves as they revise their papers based upon the concepts of rewriting. Examining the different moves provide different lenses students can use to resee their own texts in the act of rewriting.

In his concluding section of the text, *Teaching Rewriting*, Harris discusses ways teachers can implement his suggestions into an ideal writing class that attempts to include outside voices as well as student voices. Harris suggests a possible link for the weakening in students’ ability to include outside material to the testing movement that began in the 1990s, which has now encouraged a culture that rewards fast production; one draft should suffice, or one ought to complete the writing assignment within a class period. This production-line mentality discourages re-seeing and rewriting; students are arriving in college English courses with little to no experience revising texts; in fact, many students and teachers confuse revising with editing. Harris suggests several activities to help teachers illustrate the various revising moves that students need to learn to make in order to produce reflective academic prose.

Harris provides pages of worthy and helpful advice on a subject that is frequently lacking in a majority of first-year writing and writing-intensive courses today. The text is not meant to be utilized in all college writing courses, but Harris hopes the text would be considered a supplemental voice, adding to other voices in the classroom community. Even though the text categorizes itself as an academic text suitable for a college writing course, the concepts (or moves) presented would be appropriate for many genres of writing. The ongoing conversations that guide our thinking or even our own private reflections can be rewritten in our thoughts; certainly, this type of conversation is not limited to a college classroom. Towards the end of the text, Harris addresses a topic of concern for many educators, the impact of the testing industry. Testing places such emphasis on producing a standard product, usually a formulaic writing product reflecting a five-paragraph

format that leaves no room for revision or re-anything for that matter. Students are pressured to produce in as little as 20 minutes. Harris addresses the testing emphasis and acknowledges “the pace and structure of American schooling, whose frequent exams reward students who can produce quick clean essays on demand” (p. 101); however, even though he discusses the culture’s shift towards writing instruction dependent upon correctness, such as grammar, he does not further explore the ramifications of rewriting for students who have not experienced much writing besides the five-paragraph format. Upon arriving at college after such experiences, students are unprepared to work with other forms of writing, such as a personal narrative piece. However, with the assistance of Harris’ advice and discussions, students may become more aware of new possibilities and conversations surrounding them.

References

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