INSIDE HIGHER ED

From Dreaded to Amazing

Cathy Davidson describes how to transform your "revise and resubmit" comments from one to the other.

By **Cathy N. Davidson**   // February 12, 2019

Perhaps the biggest turning point in my career as a researcher and writer came the day that it dawned on me that receiving a "revise and resubmit" reader's report -- or any kind of professional feedback -- was a gift, not a curse and a condemnation. The first few times it felt like, no matter what I did, some "authority figure" was going to tell me how wrong or bad or stupid I was. Sound familiar?

Then I showed one of my early R and R's to a senior colleague. (This in itself was a big step.) "Can you believe this sexist response?" I began to fume. Fortunately, my wonderful senior colleague, Linda Wagner-Martin -- then at Michigan State University, and the single most prolific scholar I've known in my entire career -- stayed calm, heard me out and asked to read the reader's report. And then she said something like, "Oh, how lucky! Someone was willing to take time out of their own obligations to make sure your work would be publishable -- and is pushing you to be as good as you can be."

Thank you, Linda. That was decades ago -- a couple dozen books ago for me and maybe 100 or 200 for Linda. (Google her!) We even did a few massive books together. (See *Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States* (http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195066081.001.0001/acref-9780195066081) .) I've never forgotten that lesson from my days as a new, shaky assistant prof who came to my first tenure-track job after three years adjuncting all over the place. I'll say it again -- "Thank you, Linda Wagner-Martin."

The point is that, whatever method you use, *you* should take control of the revision process. For me, the mental shift from "dreaded" to "amazing" comes when I take over the reports and translate them from "their critique of me" to "my action plan for me."

Here's what I do, especially if there are multiple readers' reports. I break it all down into microsteps, which -- at least, for me -- makes it easier.

Deconstructing the R and R

I begin by deconstructing the reader's reports. I use a template, which I describe later in this essay, in order to make the process as clean, clear, even mechanical (unemotional) as possible. Here are the specific steps I take:

- I print out the reader report(s) to make it easier to deconstruct them. (This is not the time to go paperless.)

- I make four categories that I'll explain in more depth later, into which I will put every single comment by each reader. I cut and paste everything from the reader's report onto separate pages for each category.

- I make each category its own sheet(s). I print these out and then I literally check off the boxes after I do something so I have a clear visual of completion and progress. (This is unlike editing online where your work disappears and your faults seem to stay, and stay, and stay!)

Then, I turn to my manuscript:

- I keep a clean original copy of my full manuscript -- exactly what the readers saw.

- I make an online copy of the manuscript using a visually and distinctly different font or type size or margins or color.

- I make my revisions, both by hand and online, on this new copy, leaving the original pristine. At some point(s), I also want a physical copy of the revision so I can see how much I'm accomplishing. Other times, I don't want to see the process -- only how the final version is coming along.

Rewarding myself with progress on these steps is essential for an R and R.

The Template

numbers if they are available.

Action: I don't touch anything that both readers love, and you shouldn't, either. Be very careful changing anything even one reader loves if the other one doesn't mention it. The easiest way to defeat yourself with an R and R is to revise the *good parts that don't need revision*.

No. 2. Small, easy, fixable things. These include typos, fact errors, run-on sentences, clarity points and the like. Again, I list these according to Reader A, Reader B or both.

Action: I like to fix simple things first. I literally go through the new manuscript in its new revision 2 font and make all these changes. Every time I make a change, I check it off on my No. 2 sheet: Small, Easy, Fixable Things. This is a great psychological warmup for tackling the next step.

No. 3. Large, conceptual, and structural revisions. This is where I do much more extensive work on the piece.

Action: Sometimes I do this with a trusted writing group or friend. I like to make the revision first, then show someone the before and the reader's comment and the after and get feedback. It's easy to get lost. I do not have a method for whether to do both or the one or the other first. But I like to get feedback on how I'm doing any time I feel stuck.

No. 4. Paranoid readings of readers' reports. This is what I *think* is actually happening in reader's reports but that they aren't saying. Vocalized, paranoid readings usually go something like: "I'm sure I know who Reader A was. He's a misogynist and hates feminist work."

Paranoid readings overemphasize critique and undervalue the readers' support. In my experience, paranoid reading is typically wrong.

NB: I was editor of *American Literature* for a decade and heard versions of this paranoid reading dozens of times, including guesses about the specific person who must have written the report. About 99 percent of the time, people were wrong in their guesses. Often, it was not some enemy from a different critical camp but a friend/colleague who offered critique in the hopes that it would make the final essay even stronger.

Action: The only thing to do with any such paranoid feeling is to label it: "This is my suspicion, my paranoia. This is not actually in the reports. I'm going to just leave it there and not change a thing in the essay to feed this paranoia. It's like trolls: *Don't Feed the Paranoia*."

I have used this method for a few decades, on both scholarly and trade nonfiction and on fiction, too. I hope you might find it useful to see what someone who has written lots of books, articles, papers and talks does with reader's reports. You'll find your own method as you think about how to read and respond to feedback, and turn

Bio

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