

The Revision Files

THE WORD *REVISION* COMES FROM THE LATIN *REVIDERE*, which literally means “to see again.” When you revise your writing, that’s exactly what you are doing. You are looking at the words you put down on a page with a fresh eye. You are making choices about which words to keep or cut, how to arrange paragraphs and sentences, where to begin and how to end. Revision is not easy—but all writers (even famous ones) do it.

History Is Full of Revisions

Thomas Jefferson

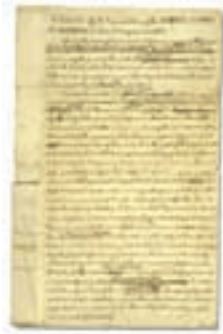
In 1776, Thomas Jefferson secluded himself in a room for two weeks to write the first draft of the Declaration of Independence. He might have written a masterpiece, but that didn’t mean his work was over.

Jefferson’s document was then revised by John Adams and Benjamin Franklin. A total of 47 changes were made to the Declaration of Independence before it was presented to the Continental Congress on June 28, 1776.

The revision did not stop there. After voting for independence on July 2, 1776, Congress continued to make changes—approving 39 additional revisions to

the committee draft before adopting it on July 4, 1776.

History recalls that Jefferson was not happy about all the suggested changes, but he didn’t have a choice. He was making revision history!



Above: A manuscript of the first page of an early draft of the Declaration of Independence, by Thomas Jefferson. See page 3 for a larger version.



The Granger Collection

“When you reach the end of your rope, tie a knot in it and hang on.”

—Thomas Jefferson

Revision Takes Time



E. B. White

“WHERE’S PAPA GOING WITH THAT AXE?” SAID FERN TO HER MOTHER AS THEY WERE SETTING THE TABLE FOR BREAKFAST.”

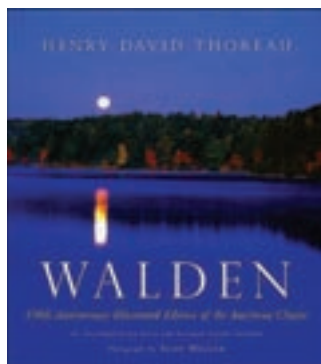
If you think E. B. White whipped out the memorable first line of *Charlotte’s Web* in a jiffy, you’re in for a surprise. White struggled through eight drafts and many beginnings for his classic children’s story.

In one draft, White’s first line was a description of Charlotte, the spider that saves a pig named Wilbur. In another, his book began with Wilbur, a “small, nicely-behaved pig living in a manure pile in the cellar of a barn.” His third draft opened with a poetic tribute to the barn in which the animals lived. Yet another attempt opened with the farmer counting a litter of newborn pigs, which included Wilbur.

It was only after experimenting with these unsuccessful starts that White finally made the decision to begin his novel with a line of dialogue spoken by Fern Arable, an 8-year-old farm girl whose father is about to kill a small piglet. What could be better than that?



Photofest



Henry David Thoreau

After roughing it in the woods for two years and two months, Henry David Thoreau spent nine years composing and revising *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, his groundbreaking narrative about his experiences.

<p>July 4, 1845 Thoreau moves to Walden Pond to launch his historic experiment in simple living.</p>	<p>September 6, 1847 Thoreau leaves Walden Pond for Concord, Mass.</p>	<p>August 9, 1854 <i>Walden; or, Life in the Woods</i> is published.</p>
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“Simplify, simplify.” —Henry David Thoreau

Mark Twain

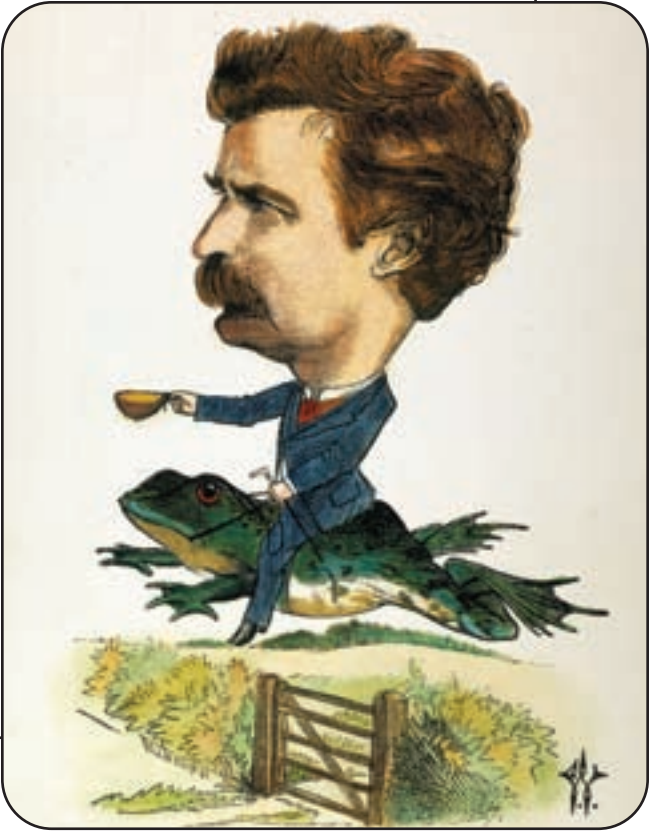
The renowned American humorist and author of the classic *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was a big advocate of concise writing. He is famous for saying, “Eschew surplusage!” But he also knew that writing short was much harder than writing long.

He once received this telegram from a publisher:

NEED 2-PAGE SHORT
STORY TWO DAYS.

Twain sent the following reply:

NO CAN DO 2 PAGES
TWO DAYS. CAN DO 30
PAGES TWO DAYS.
NEED 30 DAYS DO 2 PAGES.



This illustration was inspired by Mark Twain's 1865 short story "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County."

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A Second Set of Eyes Always Helps

Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson is best known as *the* solitary poet of American literature. We often picture her writing poetry alone, hunched over an oil lamp. But scholars recently discovered that even she got by with a little help from a friend.

In fact, she engaged in long correspondences about her compositions with her best friend and sister-in-law, Susan Huntington Gilbert Dickinson. Susan wrote Emily long letters filled with comments and suggestions—and Emily used that feedback to revise her poems. Go to snipurl.com/oq55 to view an exhibit about Dickinson’s poem “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers.” The exhibit includes letters that Susan and Emily exchanged.

“We write frankly and fearlessly, but then we ‘modify’ before we print.” —Mark Twain