

Teaching Nonfiction Revision

A Professional Writer Shares
Strategies, Tips, and Lessons

Sneed B. Collard III • Vicki Spandel

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For Amy, Braden, and Tessa: The best revisions I ever made.

—Sneed



*I would like to dedicate this book to all those students and
teachers who have asked me the important question:*

“What do writers actually do when they revise?”

I hope this book provides some answers for you.

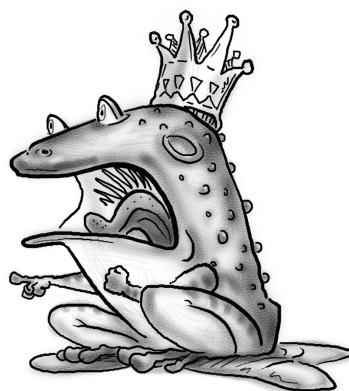
—Vicki



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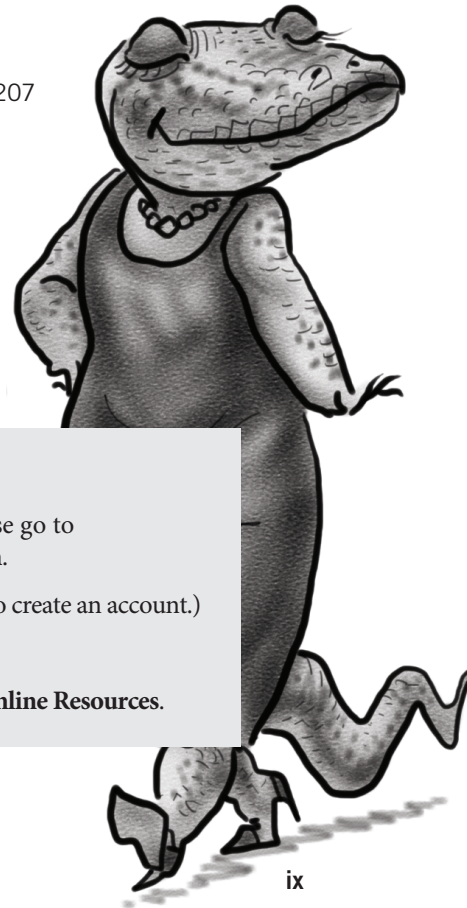
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

From Sneed . . .

It's no small challenge to properly acknowledge the many people who contributed to this project—by far the largest and most involved of my career. The obvious place to start is with my wonderful colleague, Vicki Spandel, and our amazing editor, Katie Wood Ray.

This is the first book I have ever coauthored, and Vicki rendered the process both pleasurable and incredibly educational. Not only was she instrumental in conceptualizing the project, but she added depth and insight I could only have imagined before I began. She also put up with my grumbles and—choose all of the above—inspired, provoked, and goaded the best out of me. And did I mention she's a lot of fun? Thank you, Vicki!

And Katie? Well, that's easy. She simply delivered the most productive, insightful, and enjoyable editorial process of my career.

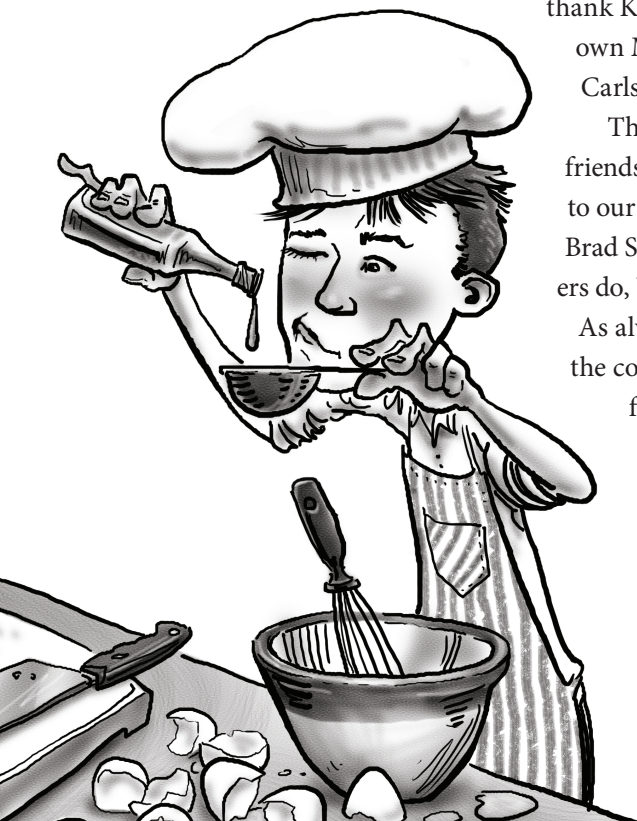
I also want to add my thanks to the teachers and students who provided their help and writing samples for us to work with. I am especially grateful to Judy Mazur and her incredible class, and Elizabeth Fessler and her terrific students, with a special shout-out to Jack Clark. I was touched both by these teachers' willingness to help, and by their

students' passion for writing and learning. I would also like to thank Keegan Clarke and send one last "thank you" to my own Miles City writing camp students, especially Anna Carlson. I'm waiting for your first book, Anna!

Thank you, too, to Vicki's and my author and artist friends who were willing to add a well-timed quote or two to our message, and to the consummate artist, my "cousin" Brad Sneed, who helped bring this book alive. As all writers do, Vicki and I stand on wide and mighty shoulders.

As always, I could not have tackled this project without the complete support of my family. My wife, Amy, never flagged in believing that I not only could, but *should* write this book. My son Braden and daughter Tessa both took more than a casual interest, and provided me with just the right writing samples at just the "write" times. I love you. You are the best!

—Sneed B. Collard III



From Vicki . . .

First and foremost, I want to thank the students who shared their writing with us, knowing full well that Sneed and I planned to pick it apart to illustrate revision opportunities. I'd love to bottle your fearlessness and share it with writers everywhere.

I also want to thank the teachers whose expertise helped me, over time, deepen my understanding of writing workshop, revision, and the art of conferring with students. They include Judy Mazur—who also helped us procure diverse student writing samples for this book—as well as Megan Sloan, Billie Lamkin, Jeff Hicks, Steve Peha, Andrea Dabbs, Leila Naka, Jeff Anderson, and Rosey Dorsey.

It's no secret to anyone who's been in one of my workshops that I've admired Katie Wood Ray's work for years. My copy of *What You Know by Heart* is so "loved" it can no longer travel with me because the pages are literally falling out. When I learned Katie would be our editor for this book, I knew we had won the publishing lottery.

Katie believed in this book from day one, embracing our goal of bringing professional-level revision strategies right into everyday writing workshop. She brought her years of classroom experience to bear on the project, helping us zero in on revision mysteries that plague both students and teachers—and her approach was consistently hands-on. She cautioned us from the outset that she would be reading our manuscript perhaps more closely than anyone had ever read our work before. Some writers might find that intimidating; we loved it. Katie's insightful and persistent questions, comments, and suggestions continually awakened fresh ideas, pushing us deeper and deeper into the revision process, and helping us make the book all we wanted it to be.

For me, working with Katie was like having a one-on-one conference with the writing mentor who had inspired me for years. What a rare privilege. Our deepest thanks to you, Katie.

Naturally, I need to say a word about my coauthor.

A couple years ago I was beachcombing outside Port Douglas in Queensland—hoping not to bump into the neighborhood crocodile—when I got an email from one of my favorite nonfiction authors: Sneed Collard. Sneed was considering writing a book to help young writers revise their own nonfiction effectively, and asked me, "What do you think of that idea?"

What did I think? Why, it was the most exciting news I'd heard since my husband announced we were going to Australia. When Sneed invited me to be part of the project, I was overjoyed.

It's an understatement to say I appreciate the chance to work with Sneed, whose humor, knowledge, compelling voice, and meticulous research have made his many

books such a delight to read. But most of all, I want to thank Sneed for involving me in an approach I'll call "team writing."

Our process for putting this book together made for one of my finest writing experiences ever. I'd draft or revise a section and send it off to Sneed for his review and comments—and he would do the same, sending his latest copy to me. Something about ongoing immediate feedback electrifies the whole revision process.

Of course, I've worked with numerous coauthors in the past. This time, though, it was different. Why? For one thing, I was both writer and reader *all the time*—and that's about as much fun as someone who loves writing the way I do can have. Moreover, the revision was recursive. We had time to reflect. And to change our minds—repeatedly. That difference taught me something important. While a one-time revision focuses all our energies on the document at hand, ongoing revision *with a partner* teaches us deeper lessons about the act of revision itself—in particular, about how our words affect readers.

Thank you, Sneed, for giving me the chance to be part of this project; for making revision enlightening, rewarding, and outrageously fun; and most of all, for sharing what really goes on in a writer's head. From now on, whenever I struggle with an unwieldy nonfiction passage, I will just listen for your voice echoing in my head—"You could cut this part, Vicki . . . Here's another sentence that could go . . . You really don't need this word . . . or this one . . ."

—*Vicki Spandel*

INTRODUCTION

The Rosetta Stone

You've just put on the original Broadway soundtrack to *Les Misérables* and settled into that comfy, leather reading chair you picked up at a garage sale last summer. On your lap sits the latest pile of papers from your seventh-grade language arts class. The students' assignment? To revise a short report they had written two weeks ago. Feeling hopeful, you reach for the top paper, "The Rosetta Stone," by Allie—one of your more promising young writers. Allie has stapled her original draft to the revision, so you begin by reviewing that:

The Rosetta Stone was discovered by French captain Pierre Bouchard. At the time, the pharaoh Ptolemy V's reign, he told the priests to carve it to calm down a revolt and publicly state he was the rightful pharaoh of Egypt. The Rosetta Stone is written in 3 different scripts in 2 different languages (hieroglyphic, demotic, and Greek). Thomas Young identified Ptolemy's cartouche and figured out the hieroglyphs for p, t, m, y and s. Jean-Francois Champollion figured out the 7 demotic symbols. Without this stone, we never would have deciphered Egyptian hieroglyphs. It is now considered the most important archeological artifact in the world.

Though Allie's original draft ended up vague and confusing, you thought it had potential. She had chosen a compelling topic and included interesting information about this important artifact. To help her improve the piece, you had advised her to create a timeline, clarify the roles played by Ptolemy V and Pierre Bouchard, define terms like "hieroglyphic," "cartouche," and "demotic," and help readers understand why scientists consider the Rosetta Stone so important. Did she do these things? To find out, you turn your attention to Allie's revision:

The rock called the Rosetta Stone was discovered in 1799 by French captain Pierre Bouchard while he and his soldiers were rebuilding Fort Julien during the Napoleonic wars. Earlier, in the pharaoh Ptolemy V's reign, the Egyptians were totally out of hand. He told the priests to create the stone to stop the revolt and state publicly he was the rightful pharaoh

of Egypt. The stone elucidated all the really good deeds Ptolemy did for Egypt and his people. The Rosetta Stone is written in 3 different scripts (hieroglyphic, demotic, and Greek) and 2 different languages (Greek and Egyptian). In 1814, an Egyptologist, Thomas Young recognized Ptolemy's cartouche (his name) and discovered the hieroglyphs for p, t, m, y and s, as well as which way to read them. In 1822, Jean-Francois Champollion, who knew Greek and Coptic (demotic script), figured out the same 7 demotic symbols. Using them to translate the hieroglyphs, Champollion completely deciphered the stone. Without this amazing stone, we never would have begun to read Egyptian hieroglyphs in a million years. It is now considered by far the most important rock in the world.

You lift your pen to respond, then lower it and sigh. Where do you begin? Though Allie has made a serious attempt to revise, it's difficult to detect any significant improvement. Yes, she's made her report longer, introduced new facts and vocabulary, worked on the timeline, and tried to define words readers may not be familiar with. Despite her efforts, Allie's report tells us next to nothing about Ptolemy V and the other major players in this drama. She also has yet to explain why decoding hieroglyphs was so important, how an Egyptian artifact came to be called the "Rosetta Stone," or why experts consider this ancient message the "most important rock in the world." Worse, given the weak transitions, unclear references, and parenthetical remarks, the writing bumps along like a Model A on a washed-out road.

Unfortunately, revision like Allie's is all too common. Despite decades of emphasis on writing, revision remains, for many students, as mysterious as ancient hieroglyphics. Not knowing what else to do, students plug in extra facts, make sentences longer, fix spelling, change fonts, swap one word for another—or maybe insert an adjective, adverb, or exclamation mark for emphasis.

Experienced writers approach revision very differently. For us, revision involves taking rough text and transforming it into something clear, fluent, informative—and yes, engaging.

Reconciling these two sets of expectations may seem as achievable as, say, jumping a bicycle over the Grand Canyon. And actually teaching kids to revise? Well, why not just march ourselves right off the edge?

Like most things, revision carries with it both bad and good news. The bad news is that it does indeed take years of practice to develop an intuition about where to take a piece of writing that isn't working. The good news is that most revision is methodical.

Professional writers consistently apply proven strategies to hammer and reshape nonfiction until it becomes something that educates and excites readers. These steps are not only definable, they are *teachable*.

That's why we've written this book—to demystify the revision process and provide simple strategies you can readily teach your students. Think of these strategies as a Rosetta Stone of nonfiction revision. Students may not master every strategy on the first try, but they will make huge strides toward understanding the revision process. Given practice, they will write words you will actually look forward to reading.

We have organized this book into seven sections. “Part I: Setting the Stage” comprises seven short chapters that examine the nature of revision, foundational beliefs about teaching it, and early steps your students can take to promote effective revision later. These chapters, written in response to common questions from teachers, provide a critical context for the instructional strategies that follow.

Parts II through VI contain nuts-and-bolts teaching strategies designed to strengthen students' nonfiction revision skills. These strategies proceed from “big” to “small,” and follow specific approaches many professional writers use to revise their work. We first tackle whole-manuscript issues such as content, organization, and the writer's vision. After that, we gradually work our way down through scenes, paragraphs, sentences, and words.

Part VII concludes by offering final revision suggestions along with firsthand perspective about the entire revision process.

You can read strategies to yourself—or share them aloud with your students. In many instances, chapters may spark important and useful classroom discussions. The strategies in these chapters are pulled directly from Sneed's extensive experiences writing and revising nonfiction—so when you see the word “I” in the main text, that is Sneed talking!

Following each strategy, Vicki has added two or more special features to help you teach and communicate that strategy to your students. Vicki has pulled these suggestions and exercises from her years of experience as a teacher, author, writing coach, writing workshop facilitator, and journalist. The “I” in these features is Vicki.

We want you to be able to travel through this book quickly, so we've kept each strategy as short as possible. Still, some revision concepts demand more attention than others, so we've allocated our word count accordingly.

Although our approach and exercises primarily target grades 4–8, teachers of both younger and older students can readily adapt lessons to fit their classroom needs. Whether you are a regular classroom teacher, a literacy specialist, or a writer yourself, this is *your* book, and we know you'll figure out the best way to use it. So have fun—and get ready to launch!

8

Choose Good Quotations

Skillful and timely use of quotations can work wonders in raising the quality of nonfiction writing. Experts, characters, and “witnesses” not only provide valuable information, they tell it *in their own words*—and that can make any manuscript eminently more interesting. Quotations, though, also can:

- break narrative monotony
- punctuate a point
- reveal and develop characters
- show instead of tell
- add authority
- add voice
- inject humor.

And much, much more. In fact, it’s hard to think of another tool that can transform a piece of writing so quickly and dramatically as a good quotation.

To be honest, we could have discussed quotations under paragraphs instead of sentences. In my own work, I often include quotes that extend an entire paragraph. Like most student writers, however, I frequently quote a single sentence, too, so discussing quotations under “Sentence Revision” fits here as well. Let’s look at a few examples of how quotations can help bring nonfiction writing to life.

Quote for Variety

One place I especially like to use quotations is to break up long descriptions or narratives. In *Fire Birds* (2015a), I wrote a five-paragraph scene describing scientist Dick Hutto going out to use a game caller to try to “call in” an elusive Black-backed Woodpecker. After describing Hutto walking to a likely location and the device he intended to use, I could have just written, “Next, he turns on the game caller and waits.” Instead, I decided to quote Dick directly:

“Okay,” he says. “Let’s see if anyone’s home.” (11–12)

This is the only quote in the entire scene, but it accomplishes a lot. It breaks up the monotony of my own narrative voice. It reinforces the immediacy of the scene, helping readers feel like they are part of what's going on. It helps establish Dick as a character by revealing how he talks and thinks. The choice of the quote also helps build suspense, leading the reader to wonder, "What exactly *is* going to show up here?"

Quote for Authority

Quotations are especially important when writing about controversial topics. In *Hopping Ahead of Climate Change* (2016), I tackle the highly politicized issue of our warming planet. In Chapter Two, "Hares in a Warming World," I have to firmly establish not only what is causing climate change, but the impacts of resulting higher temperatures. To do so, I present a lot of statistics, but I recognized that readers would accept statements from *bona fide* experts more than they would from me. Because of this, I include this quote from professional climate scientist Steve Running:

The winter season, with snow on the ground, is on average two to three weeks shorter than the snow cover period fifty years ago. (17)

By lending the weight of a real expert to the discussion, this quote makes the book's arguments much more convincing. It also presents climate change in terms that anyone can understand. Also, because the quote is so simple, it breaks down the barriers between skeptical readers and the scientific community. When I read this quote, I think to myself, "This is just another guy like I am, repeating an observation that is sitting right in front of him. How can I argue with that?"



A NOTE TO THE TEACHER

Preparing for On-Site Interviews

Have students consider two things when preparing for an interview. First, if possible, encourage them to conduct the interview in their expert's working "habitat." Observing a trainer working with horses, a nurse drawing blood, or a photographer struggling to get the perfect shot of a squirmy toddler adds authenticity you just can't match on the phone or in an office.

Second, have them list questions in advance—considering what readers most want to know. If I were to interview Sneed for a bio piece, I wouldn't ask who his favorite coauthor is. Too obvious. But I think readers would eat up his answers to questions like these:

- *What was your all-time favorite nonfiction topic?*
- *Did your field research ever put you in danger?*
- *Which is harder to write—fiction or nonfiction?*
- *Who's your favorite nonfiction writer—and why?*

Good interviews—and quotations—come from good questions.

Humorous Quotes

I don't know about you, but I am a sucker for humor. I'll read anything from a cereal box top to a book about croquet if it's funny. In nonfiction, though, humor isn't just an indication that something is funny; it is the mark of strong writing. Skilled writers tirelessly search for places to insert levity, and one of the simplest ways to do that is to find and use humorous quotes.

Also in *Hopping Ahead of Climate Change* (2016), I have to discuss the disturbing fact that snowshoe hares are eaten by almost every imaginable kind of predator. Fortunately, Professor Scott Mills offered a hilarious quote to help me deal with this unsavory statistic:

I call hares the candy bar of the forest, but my students call them the cheeseburger of the forest. (8)

This quote provokes a laugh in most readers, making the text more entertaining, but it also helps readers handle the gruesome reality that these adorably cute little fur balls rarely live more than a year. (FYI, this is the quote that book reviewers most often focused on, reinforcing the power of humor to make a point.)

You'll note that in each of the previous examples, a quote accomplishes multiple tasks—a key to what makes quotes so valuable. Of course, finding good quotes takes work. My favorite way to obtain quotes is to interview experts myself. If you haven't yet done so, assign your students the task of interviewing a friend or family member, then have them write a nonfiction piece about that person using the best quotes from the interview.

What if a writer can't conduct his own interviews? In such cases, it's perfectly acceptable to quote other authors or borrow from other interviews, such as those found in a book, magazine, or talk show. When writing my American Heroes biography series, I specifically looked for autobiographies or in-depth biographies that would provide a wealth of quotations from my subjects. These quotes always helped bring my writing alive—just as they will for your own students.

One final point about quotes: writers should not use quotations as a replacement for their own writing. I've seen writers quote paragraph after paragraph of an interview as a substitute for writing their own narrative. I've done it myself! Quotes, though, should only be used when they provide a special accent, emphasis, or insight to a draft—or when they help prove a point by adding an expert's authority to a discussion. Used too often or indiscriminately, quotes weaken a writer's own narrative voice and lead to a less satisfying result.



A Writing Secret to Share with Students

Quotations can't just be dropped into your text like supplies from a helicopter. Help readers understand why you chose each quotation and how it connects to the text as a whole.

Before quoting biologist Larry Gilbert (2008b 8), Sneed tells us that Dr. Gilbert is director of the Brackenridge Field Laboratory at the University of Texas. Knowing he is an authority on the topic—fire ants—gives his words even more weight. In addition, Sneed carefully links each quotation to the discussion at hand. Here, he quotes Dr. Gilbert explaining how a red ant invasion was anything but random: “Instead,” Larry describes, “it was more like Patton’s tank invasion of Europe during World War II” (11). Those little words—“Larry describes”—are critical. They tell us that this quotation from Dr. Gilbert is included to provide information as well as create an unforgettable image.

You can use many expressions to connect a speaker’s words to your discussion. Following are just a few examples:

- *As Jordan explains,*
- *Raul recalls,*
- *Wildlife expert Marie Frederick adds,*
- *Professor Smith disagrees, offering this argument:*
- *Dr. Butler sees it this way:*

Without an introduction, quotations read like interruptions. Help your readers understand whether each quotation offers an explanation, description, contradiction, humor—or something else.



Just drop 'em anywhere!

! Something to try

Choosing a Winning Quotation

A winning quotation has to make a point so effectively that the author thinks, “I couldn’t have said it better myself.”

Following are two strong quotations about climate change. Share both with students and discuss the main point each makes. Which one—if either—might your students incorporate into their own writing? Would they use the entire quotation—or only part of it? Would it be possible to use both quotations in the same report?

1. “Climate change is happening but we’re *not* doomed. We can’t stop it, but we could slow it down and we could prepare for its effects. It’s going to be a big job, and it’ll mean changing almost everything about the way we live now—how we light and heat our homes, what transportation we use, how we design buildings, how we grow food, how we handle disasters and diseases, and even how people and countries decide, together, what’s fair and what isn’t” (Davies 2011, 14).
2. “During the last century, the average temperature of the earth’s surface and the air near the surface rose between 0.6 and 0.9 degrees Centigrade. The temperature appears to be continuing to rise, and most scientists agree that a rise of two degrees would bring about catastrophic changes. Polar ice caps would melt and sea levels would rise enough to overflow many coastlines, ports, and major cities” (Kurlansky 2011, 136).

Once you finish discussing these quotations and when or how a writer might use each one, have students review any quotations they have collected for use in their own work. Ask them to identify the specific purpose behind each quotation: to inform readers, challenge common knowledge, introduce a startling fact, make readers laugh, add voice to the discussion, or something different. Suppose a writer cannot identify any particular purpose for a given quotation. Should she use it anyway—or discard it? Discuss this.

