

**RADICAL REVISION PROMPTS TO HELP YOU WITH FINAL PROJECTS:
PLEASE CHOOSE 3, and do them.**

****Read the whole list—skimming is fine—before choosing. The 3 prompts you choose should be chosen for their relative helpfulness to you—each should speak as closely as possible to those one or more things in or about your draft that you feel still can use the most work.**

THE BLUES: Additional notes for each prompt that I thought might be useful to you—optional reading—are in blue.

****Modified / expanded on by d wolach. Modified from: “Prompts for Radical Revision” by C. Moore, New York University and N. B. Wallack, Columbia University****

When Selecting From The Prompts Below:

Note the various responses or comments your readers have given you on your drafts, and consider what concerns you have about your latest draft yourself, then try **three prompts**. Each prompt is followed by a principle so that you will understand the goal of or reason for the prompt.

Why only try three?

Because you don't want to overwhelm yourself. Focusing on parts and pieces of your draft will help you to make some immediate and tangible changes in your work. It is much harder to attempt to revise a piece of writing when the task is unspecified, and when the timeframe is indefinite. Radical revision strategies are designed to focus your attention on particular kinds of work to do. While you can work on each prompt for as long as you like, you can get a lot done by writing **for ten or fifteen minutes each on the prompts** you've chosen.

Why are there so many approaches?

Because different writers are working on different things—not every writer is in the same place. As you already know, each new project brings new challenges and reminds us of older ones. For example, many people write “working” beginnings to their poems and essays as placeholders for radically revised ones, which they compose only after they have reached the end of their drafts. This common practice demonstrates how writers create spaces in their processes for discovery, and how they anticipate the need for radical revision. The radical revision prompts offer you additional strategies for making discoveries during your drafting process.

How will radical revision improve my writing?

Initially, new writing may make your draft messier...but you will be able to address those issues during a final stage of revision. Since radical revision requires you to make active and wholesale decisions about your work, you will improve your current draft, but you will also gain insight into issues you can then anticipate in future work.

Prompts for generating missing text:

1. Go to a place in the draft where you seem to be getting at what the work desires. Write to describe that desire, DEVELOP FURTHER via research when research feels called

for. “Translate” into unusual language or poetically “riff on” the description of the desire(s) of the piece. Then use any language from the description or its “poetic translation” that feels like it would work in your draft. Find a place for it somewhere in your draft. Reread your draft aloud and then ask: “does this new language work here?” Principle: Since many writers get to their ideas only at the end of their draft, this allows the writer to know that they have work to do in other places in the draft. It makes an idea specific when it was previously only general or categorical.

2. Write a summary of one of the texts you are working with (one of the assigned texts), then “translate” it into a series of metaphors, poetic lines, performance gestures, questions, etc, so that it jibes with the form of your overall work—that is, translate and then find a place for a creative interpretation of this summary (a poetic translation or a few lines, for example) in your draft. Principle: Writers need to provide context for their audience who may not have read what they’ve read. **Note from d:** each of you has drawn on at least 2 texts read in this class. Thus this prompt is likely helpful to any one of you. It seems to me that doing this as a matter of course, if you have not already, will only compliment your writing to the point that you feel that nearly all possible avenues for development or deeper questioning have been exhausted, which I asked you to do already for the 5-10-page free-write kicking off the whole process.

3. Find a key image or key language in your draft. Write to describe and/or explain what this image or language might mean. Then write TO that description by forming the “wildest” lines possible (similar to the above), thus making some further poetic language that “captures” the description of the key image or phrase. Principle: Images and even individual words often contain ideas and questions that reveal themselves with closer reading and writing.

Prompts for making connections / forming “bridges” between parts:

1. Write an unexpected, but connected story or poem that comes to mind as you read your draft. You may not know how it fits, but write it anyway. Principle: Writers often need help with the show/don’t tell problem. A surprising story can also offer a tension or highlight a dilemma that the writer may be ignoring or can’t yet see. **Note from d:** this has always for me been one way to revise my work. But keep in mind: we’ve been playing with elision/eliding and with other forms of non-standard narrative (including non-narrative, for that matter). So although this is a prompt and not itself a story-writing exercise, you may want to write elidingly here—since that a technique that you are using/playing with for your final projects.

2. Use a passage from another text to *resist* or *doubt* something you are writing about. Free-write this or otherwise find a way to write this “moment of doubt” such that the new piece of writing compliments and ALSO complicates the forms you are working with already. Principle: Writers often include counterarguments to express that they understand the complexity of the issue they are exploring—to make overt provisionality occur. **Note from d:** and in poems and other less ‘expository’ forms, where counterarguments are less obvious as such, there is still the layering and complexity that writers can only derive by way of moving away from claims of certainty, whether these are implied or overt, by doubting within your piece some claim or developed idea or image—finding a place for doubt layers and makes more complex, including, importantly, ethically, your work. After all, none of us are making proofs or research papers, and provisionality puts one in an ethically more arresting, challenging, and in fact ‘better’ overall rhetorical position than writing from claims or positions of certainty about something. I think? Anyway, this also holds if one is writing a poem or prose piece that makes an existing argument less subtle—right? (Notice the

provisionality of the last two sentences here—am I clever? I think so.)

3. Write a group of new lines (if writing lineated poetry, for example), a new paragraph or section, or a piece of fictional dialog, in which you put the cited texts you are using conversation with one another. (How do they extend, confirm, complicate, contradict, correct, or debate, harmonize, interrupt, or otherwise play with one another?) Principle: Typical compare-and contrast moments in a piece of text using citation can be derailed because the motivation (or in poems and prose the interplay more generally) is insufficiently expressed in some way. Putting texts in conversation via image, metaphor, fictional dialog, etc, can help.

Prompts for clarifying, such as making more vivid the focus, foci, lines, or argument(s) of your draft:

1. Rewrite completely the beginning of your draft to locate specifically the problems or forms your draft is exploring, or to change its focus, tone, or contrast. Principle: Early beginnings are often just a placeholder. Writers often need to create a new beginning to accommodate new thinking and writing that has occurred since the beginning was initially written.

2. Rewrite completely the ending of your draft, showing how your writing has changed from the beginning and middle of your draft. Principle: Similar to the previous one, but endings are often even more difficult for writers than introductions.

3. Find an arbitrary number of centers of gravity, i.e., central themes or questions—one or two, for example—in your draft. Write a six to eight line poem that playfully expresses how these centers of gravity are related to one another. Principle: Sometimes shifting forms/genres can allow writers to clarify thinking or ideas and then return to the original genre. It can also lead to a distillation of thinking. Sometimes the writer might even make another related piece of writing.

4. Print out your draft and cut it up into sections (a section can be as small as a line, phrase, or even a word, right?). Make sure each section that gets cut is one that does some discrete piece of work. Have you and/or a friend or feedback partner reassemble the parts in a new order and tape it to blank sheets of paper, leaving blank space between images or ideas that are not connected in ways that are satisfying to you. If you like this new order, consider what you might need to write in the blank spaces to make transitions or to flesh out ideas or forms being deployed. Principle: Writers often need to radically rethink their parts and how they relate to the whole or the ideas. This strategy also allows for cutting.

Prompts for re-imagining, re-situating, and reframing—Prompts for moving “off the page” (Performance Prompts):

1. Go to a place in your draft where you would like to say, sound, or “do” more, where you desire to further the language even though you may feel it is sufficiently developed. Create three new images, such as stanzas, or dialogs, or paragraphs (depending on what you feel you need be doing with this prompt). Find ways to use some of this language in your draft. Then use the language that you do not find a use for in the draft and figure out how to perform them off the page, i.e., to make them be gestural or live and not written parts of your performance. Principle: When you write a little bit too much, you force yourself a little past what you know. And you end up writing a little that

can sometimes be useful for a performance/a reading aloud of your piece but that is not useful to put in the writing itself.

2. Cut up a good chunk of your draft line by line with scissors (different from above). Spread out the lines in front of you and re-arrange them. Then ask a friend or feedback partner to re-arrange them in the order that makes sense to that friend (not to you, in other words). Add new language to the rearranged lines, or make cuts in response to this new order that BOTH of you have worked to create. Principle: Writers often need to radically rethink, alongside others, their parts and how they relate to the whole or the idea. This strategy also allows for cutting, sometimes leaving as-is the new “cutup” and finding a place for it in your draft.

3. Locate a key image or poetic phrase or metaphor, line, etc in your draft. Treat the six lines that follow this key image, poetic phrase or metaphor, line, etc., as “stage directions” for your performance. That is, “translate” the six lines following a key image you’ve located into a set of directions for a performance of the draft. Try out your new “stage directions” and see if they feel right to you—read aloud etc in the way that these directions ask you to. If the directions feel right, either incorporate them somewhere into your written draft as new language, or incorporate them into the performance of that writing—but not both. Principle: even if you are not “acting out” or reading aloud your work in the public space your work will be interacting with, your performance of the final project will at very least include a live reading to your peers from the writing you’ve done—from your draft. Finding language in your draft that can be translated into off-the-page directions for certain gestures or ways of standing, voicing, or intoning, that is, locating directives to do certain actions within the writing itself, can help you reach a deeper understanding of your overall project, and thus “rehearsing” these new directions you’ve made will give you new insight into whether any already-existing plans you have for the performance of your work, and its interaction with public spaces, are complete, or whether they in fact need further development. Who knows, perhaps these directions will become vital to your performance of text in a public space.

4. Read your draft aloud to yourself and/or friends. Then locate three places (good sized chunks of the writing) that you “translate” into a script for a performance that has yet to exist—a script that may or may not relate to the original writing/your final project performance ideas. Then try performing the new script (try for 2-3 pages of script with dialog, stage directions, and perhaps music, for the musically inclined!). If the new script feels compelling enough for you, find a place or places in your written draft for it OR find a way to incorporate it into the performance of your writing. Principle: similar to the above, only here you are also changing genres. See below for changing genres and why this is important to try. But beyond the importance of shifting genres around, writers for performance often can’t see where the writing and performance are interestingly in tension, or can be. This prompt helps create, as well as locate, tensions and performance/performative potentials within your written draft.

5. Write down a description of how you plan to “perform the text” – how you plan to perform this draft. Then write a description of how this draft will interact with public space and how this, in your mind, differs, if at all, from reading this draft aloud to your peers for class. Write 2-3 paragraphs of description. Then “translate” this description into a poetic conversation or dialog between two characters. Find some place or places in your draft where some of this “dialog” or “conversation” can be useful, and use it there, smoothing out your placement of this language by writing the necessary transitional language, thus connecting the parts of your new dialog/conversation that you selected with the language in your draft that was already there. Principle: writing descriptively about how your draft will be used in/as performance will help you see where you have the performance (off the page elements) worked out and where questions still remain, hence will allow you

to give your plans detail before executing them. Translating the description of your performance plans into a conversation will simultaneously make your plans more vivid (and the problems of any of your plans more vivid) and give you new language to try to incorporate into your draft. Thirdly, and related: in some cases, the writer will find that sharp formal shifts in the language work well (some pieces desire oscillating forms, and often desire sharp movement from one form to another). Thus in some cases shifting up the form sharply or suddenly will help writers “find a form” that the piece desires. In other cases shifts will add formal inventiveness to an already existing form (this is often just as true for when writers purposefully find ways to drastically shift the tone of the piece, or its prosody, its grammar, its lineation/shape on the page, or syntax—what other formal shifts that occur sharply can you as writer think of and make in your draft as way to play with form?)

6. Change the point of view of the draft. For example, if the poetry is in first person, change it to second or third. If it shifts points of view throughout, find two or three substantial places and rearrange the points of view (invert them from how you have them now). Principle: A shift in point of view can often reveal the central questions and ideas in the draft, or the focus (or foci) of the draft. **This shift can be vital: it can help complicate or make more complex your existing poetry/creative writing.** Changing point of view, or *making an explicit a point of view from the existing language when there wasn't any obvious point of view there in the first place* (as in some poetic work), can also allow you to “make room” for the reader to do work to make meaning out of your language—such that meaning isn't just handed to the reader. And, as importantly, such a shift will shift the writer away from thinking that they are always “needing to mean something” or have a point besides the formal inventiveness of the writing itself. In other words: this helps the writer make sure that reference and significance of the writing to the author of the piece doesn't simply overtake the draft as the reason for this project's existence (formal invention, language play, sensuous play, sound-making, performability, making the language unusual, etc, are all equally good reasons for a piece of writing to exist, no?). Who should this draft matter to? Who is central to the draft? Point of view can help you find this out, or make your “readership” more legible to you.

7. Shifting forms/formal genres for a part of your draft: For a good chunk of your draft, write the prose version of the poem where you feel or know that “a moment of poetry” is happening, or write the poetry version of the “essayistic moment” where essay (or prose) is happening, or write the “play script” version of the piece of fiction that you are writing, etc. What can you take from this different genre or formal version of the writing, keeping in mind the original form of your language? Does the new language stay? Parts of it? Do you oscillate between genres or forms from “section” to “section”? Does all of it stay, at least for that section which you've “translated” from one genre or form of writing to another? Principle: Changing the genre of a piece can often allow writers to discover new thinking or ideas in the original piece. **In other words: dramatically shifting genres for this prompt is the important move.** Some of this writing will find its way into your final version! Or even get you to realize that some bit of alternating genres/forms is what your piece was desiring (or doing) all along! Or conversely that this is *not* the kind of formal interplay that your final version desires, so gets you to scale back a bit from the collision of genres!

8. Rethink the public space elements—which public space you will be intervening in and the sort of intervention that you will be doing by doing the following: SCOUT new locations and choose two to perform a “dry run” of your final project in. Before performing your dry run in each of two different locations, shift up the way you are planning on having the writing perform. For instance, try reading out loud your draft or parts of it if you had been planning on handing out copies or leaving copies someplace; try leaving copies if you had planned on reading out loud; try memorizing your piece and performing it from memory if you hadn't planned on it; try performing another, a text that is not yours (a copy of an assigned text, for example) and if your performance of THAT text works well, then question whether your initial idea is meant for the piece

you are working on (your draft) or whether it is too generic. Try having multiple voices read aloud (yours and a recorded voice, or several voices and a recorded voice). Try using something other than paper to perform your written text (gesture, for instance, or signs made from materials that you can easily transport). Principle: changing up your performance plans by performing the text in new locations under different conditions is a good way to practice what is working and find out what is not working. Perhaps no interesting conflicts or tensions between written page and performed page are coming about. If not, then perhaps redoing things in different ways will not only help you recognize this, but help you find another performative angle or gesture you hadn't yet thought of that is closer to what the writing desires from you.

Prompts for making writing less general and more particular—tightening:

- 1. Cut at least five lines from your draft.** Principle: Cutting can help writers articulate.... and get to the kernel of an idea, a key metaphor that was hidden, or find that key image.
- 2. Find key 3-4 key images, ideas, or other central pieces of language (find 3-4 parts within a couple of your centers of gravity). Rewrite this to make specific/particular the similes, metaphors, and/or images you are making in those places of your draft. Use thesaurus, etymological dictionary and other online tools (such as language randomizers or other generators) to change the wording in ways you wouldn't typically use (into less of "your voice"). Incorporate the new, more specific or particularized language.** Principle: Fresh images, metaphors, and language that hones in on what you are "getting at," or what the work desires, are integral to any good writing. Getting rid of tired language, stock phrases, generalities, platitudes and clichés, can reveal new more interesting language and thinking underneath these, and enhance the pleasure of the reader. [Use of thesaurus and dictionaries, even online "language generators" are all incredibly helpful in finding new words or happily making those surprising and apt connections between words, lines, or ideas \(as in the case of using online language generators — such as translation generators\).](#) Make use not just of your research, but consider any and all databases/archives for language that are available online or elsewhere.
- 3. Bring together two parts of your draft by cutting, rearranging, then reshaping lines on the page. Where this feels impossible, take note and ask how these parts are possibly connected—if they are.** Principle: Some drafts are actually more than one piece of writing and untangling this writing can allow the writer to revise with more focus.
- 4. Consider the syntax and overall "shape" of the language on the page. What sorts of sentence or line are you interested in creating in this draft? What sorts of shape best gets at what you feel the draft and overall performative piece (including off the page elements) is desiring to do? Change your line length to alter the shape of the poem typographically or change your verb tenses or other parts of syntax to alter the verbiage and shape. Reread the old version, then the new version, out loud. Which do you prefer?** Principle: Changes in the syntax, verb choice, line length, and changes in the shape of the language (such as changing a prose piece into a lined poetry piece) can alter the meaning and provide pleasure for the writer and reader—and help the writer ultimately find the form that the work desires.
- 5. As always RESEARCH as necessary (this is one the central constraints) but here, use researching something in your draft you want to know more about, or feel you should develop more, as a prompt for revision. Do so by way of online and/or library research, looking up key terms, names, places, etc. Take notes for 20 min once you've done some of the research—taking note of what is important or interesting. Find ways to incorporate this new language from research into your draft.**

6. And, as always, READ ALOUD by yourself or with a friend who is also, along with you, marking your draft up. Regardless, by oneself and/or with a feedback partner: READ ALOUD AND BRIEFLY STOP TO MAKE A MARK ON THE PAGE AT EVERY PLACE THAT YOU FEEL, upon hearing yourself read, THERE IS A PROBLEM. KEEP READING AND MARKING TILL FINISHED WITH THE DRAFT. ONLY THEN GO BACK AND BEGIN TO MAKE CHANGES. Then switch off: have your friend read aloud, and you mark silently as you listen. Make more changes after that. By the end, the writer should have no more elements of the writing that feel off or “not right.” One should have managed to read straight through without stopping to make a mark to change something.