RADICAL REVISION PROMPTS TO HELP YOU WITH FINAL PROJECTS:

PLEASE CHOOSE 1-3, i.e., at least 1 and up to 3 prompts, and do them. Read the whole list—skimming is fine—before choosing. These 1-3 should be chosen for their relative helpfulness to you—each should speaking as closely as possible to those one or more things in or about your drafts that you feel still need(s) the most work.

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

**Modified / altered 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 at least one and up to 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 one to 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 many experienced writers 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 your idea. Write to describe what that idea might be, DEVELOP FURTHER via research when research feels called for. 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, then “translate” it into a series of metaphors, questions, etc, so that it jibes with the form of the 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 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 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. Principle: Images and even individual words often contain ideas and questions that reveal themselves with closer reading and writing.

Prompts for making connections

1. Write an unexpected, but connected story, or other form of narrative (such as a narrative 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 (or 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 chunk 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. 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 (one of your “items of language to include in” in your checklist) 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. This also holds if one is writing a poem or prose piece that makes an existing argument less subtle.

3. Write a new paragraph, a group of new lines (if writing lineated poetry, for example), or a piece of fictional dialog, in which you put the cited texts you have used already in 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 articulate specifically the problems or forms your draft is exploring, or to change its focus, tone, or contract. 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—one or two, for example. 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. If writing poetry for your final project, do the same thing, but (obviously) use a form other than a poetic form — a couple paragraphs that could easily be considered “essay” by a reader, or forms, such as script-forms, from the theater that
are typical to theater, or.... In other words: dramatically shifting genres for this prompt is the important move, so shift the genre from yours to another genre for six to eight lines, or for a paragraph, etc. 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!

4. Print out your draft and cut it up into sections (a section can be as small as a sentence or a line or even a word, right?). Make sure each section that gets cut is one that each 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 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:

1. Go to a place in your draft where you would like to say, sound, or “do” more, or one way or another, where you desire to further develop something. 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. Principle: When you write a little bit too much, you force yourself a little past what you know.

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. Change the point of view of the draft. For example, if the poem 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 ideas in the draft or the focus (or foc) of the draft. This shift can be vital: it can help complicate or make more complex your existing poetry. Changing point of view, or making an explicit point of view from the existing language when there wasn’t any obvious point of view there in the first place, 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. In other words: this helps the writer make sure that meaning doesn’t simply overtake the draft as the reason for this project’s existence (formal invention, language play, sensuous play, sound-making, 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.

4. **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? 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.

**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 more specific/particular the similes, metaphors, and/or images you are making in those places of your draft. **Incorporate the new, more specific or particularized language.** Principle: Fresh images, metaphors, and language that hones in on what you are “getting at,” 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).** 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, reshaping.** 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 or verbs in your draft.** What sorts of sentence or line
are you interested in creating in this draft? Change your line length to alter the shape of the poem typographically or by changing your verb tenses or other parts of syntax. Re-read the old version, then the new version, out loud. Principle: Changes in the syntax, verb choice, line length, and shape of the language can alter the meaning and provide pleasure for the writer and reader.

5. As always RESEARCH as necessary (this is one of your items in the checklist!), but here, use researching something 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.