

Marlin's big list of revision strategies:

There's no one right way to revise a poem. Here are some approaches you can try, but first: remember that revision isn't merely the process of "fixing" the "problems" in a piece; it's about finding the opportunities to make the poem the best version of itself in terms of development, structure, focus, polish, and so on.

Revision is often a multi-step process; sometimes it means completely re-writing a piece. Sometimes it means polishing up a few lines. These strategies cover a wide range across that spectrum.

1. Read the poem, out loud or silently, and mark (highlight, underline, etc.) any moments that catch your attention in particular—could be because of the energy, the sounds, the images, the content. Then ask yourself: why *aren't* the other moments catching your attention in the same way?
2. Read the poem aloud. Mark any moments that you gloss over or trip over. Then ask yourself why (if you're losing interest or getting tripped up, a reader/listener might, too!)
3. With a hard copy and a pen (or using track changes or a similar function), go line by line, or sentence by sentence, and put everything on trial: if you can't justify why a particular line/phrase/word/sentence is there, cross it out/delete it. Read the new, shorter draft. How has the poem changed? This might help you make hard cuts, but it will also make you more aware of why you're adding back in the things you decide to add back in.
4. Circle every image. Highlight every metaphor. Underline every instance of sound-resonance (rhyme, consonance, assonance). Star every repetition. What patterns do you now notice? What do those patterns teach you about the current state of the draft and where it might go next?
5. If the poem is lineated, collapse it into a prose block. Re-do all the line breaks from scratch and see what new opportunities for pacing, space, and emphasis (etc.) emerge from the new breaks.
6. Change the poem's tense and POV. What changes?
7. Re-write the poem so it has no complete sentences. What's the effect of these fragments?
8. Re-write the poem with attention to varying sentence length.
9. Revise the poem so it's a stichic—a one-stanza poem with lines of all approximately the same length (and perhaps similar meter).
10. Write a palinode—a poem that retracts something from the previous poem. Then, find a way to merge the two poems.
11. Break the poem into sections. What happens with the shifts between sections? Or if the poem is already in sections, re-write it as one section.
12. Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon might ask something like: what is the poem pretending it doesn't know?
13. Tarfia Faizullah might suggest hanging out with your poem. Maybe read it to yourself each night before bed, maybe post it on a bulletin board or your fridge and glance at it every so often. Once you know the poem intimately, then sit down with it to work on it more.

14. Don't look at the poem for at least 2 weeks. Then, re-read it. What do you notice after having some distance from it?
15. Read your poem aloud to a friend. What do you notice while you have an audience? Are there any moments that make you particularly self-conscious to share? Why do you think that is?
16. Have a friend read your poem aloud to you. What do you notice while hearing it in someone else's voice?
17. Have Siri or another software read your draft to you. What do you notice while hearing it from that voice?
18. Pretend you didn't write the draft. Write a list of questions you'd have for the author of the poem. Do you have answers to those questions?
19. Try to re-write the poem into a traditional form.
20. Find a moment in the poem that might make a good first line/opening. Then, separately, find a moment that would make a good final line/ending. Re-structure the poem around those new beginnings/endings.
21. Pick a favorite published poem. What are your favorite elements of that poem? What would it look like to inject some of those elements into your poem?
22. Louise Glück might suggest checking the poem for *stock footage*—moments, images, language, etc. that we've seen before, that feel generic. Edit out all the stock footage.
23. Danez Smith might suggest rewriting the poem (from memory) without looking at the current version. Then, compare them, what stuck in the new version? What new things developed? What didn't make it in?
24. Aracelis Girmay¹ might suggest a strategy that she used when writing poems in *the black maria*: sweeping away the whale. She “created a narrator who might speak through and to a whale”, but eventually realized the whale was holding the poems back from where they were going. As a revision for your draft, try to “sweep away the whale”: remove the very thing that inspired it, and see what's left.
25. Adrian Matejka and Gregory Pardlo might talk about how the speaker isn't always the “hero” in their poems. Is your speaker trying to be the hero, the good guy, when they aren't? What would the poem look like if the speaker wasn't the hero?
26. David Baker might argue that one good idea isn't enough for a successful poem, you need (at least) 2. There are various ways we could try to apply this idea. Maybe brainstorm a separate poem idea, and inject it into this draft. Maybe find a new metaphor to become a primary driving force in the poem, in conversation with what's already there. Maybe look at two drafts that you're working on revising, and try to combine them. (Maybe that means sections, maybe weaving lines together, maybe injecting images from one into the other, etc. etc.)
27. Marianne Boruch might argue that all poems are sonnets because all poems have a volta—a moment where the poem shifts. Does the draft have a shift somewhere, in subject, in types of images, in syntax, through narrative climax, etc. etc.? If so, what does the shift reveal about the direction of the poem, and what does that tell you about how to develop the draft? If there are no notable shifts, what does that reveal about the current state of the draft?
28. Tarfia Faizullah might suggest reading the poem from bottom to top. What does the reversed order reveal about the poem, its order, the way it progresses?
29. Review the “Ways to Approach Reading a Poem” handout/list; while we might also use those strategies toward published poems we're studying, use them for your draft as a way to dig deeper into the poem, then revise based on any new insights.

If you're looking for a specific multi-step strategy, perhaps try this one (transcribed from an event with Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon, March 2016):

1. Find the worst sentence (not line!) in the draft—delete it.
2. Find the second worst sentence—revise it.
3. Find a declarative sentence and change it to an imperative, an interrogative, or an exclamatory.
4. Find 7-9 words that are the foundation of the poem—that hold the poem up. Make a list of those words and, only looking at the list, add a word that goes with them.
5. Add this word to the draft as a fragment.
6. Revise title so one of the listed words is in the title.

Watch out for these common issues (these are in no way meant to be prescriptive):

- lack of specificity—the poem is general and stuck in clichés/trite language/abstractions
- too much exposition—the draft is explaining something but not inviting the reader into an experience
- needs pruning—the poem might have lots of great moments that just aren't serving this poem: consider trimming them from this poem, and saving them for later
- “no surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader”—the poem is too certain about its direction, and comes off as didactic and/or flat instead of exploratory

Practical tips:

- When you make a revision in a computer document, save it as a separate file so you can hold on to old versions, just in case.
- Consider listing a date on drafts to help keep things in order and ensure you're looking at the most recent version.
- Experiment with different methods to see what works best for you: do you work better with a hard copy or on a laptop? A mix of the two?

*Disclaimer on the inclusion of names: the inclusion of these poets is meant to attribute credit where it's due and to provide a variety of voices and sources. They're based on advice from a variety of origins—Q&A's, direct conversations, workshops, Twitter, and so on, but they are not to be taken as direct quotes unless clearly noted as such.

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ⁱ “from the horse's mouth: with aracelis girmay”, interview with Chen Chen for Iron Horse Review, Apr 25, 2016

<https://www.ironhorsereview.com/single-post/2016/04/25/would-i-like-for-it-to-be-a-bouquet-of-dreams-interview-with-aracelis-girmay>