

Da Vinci on Revision

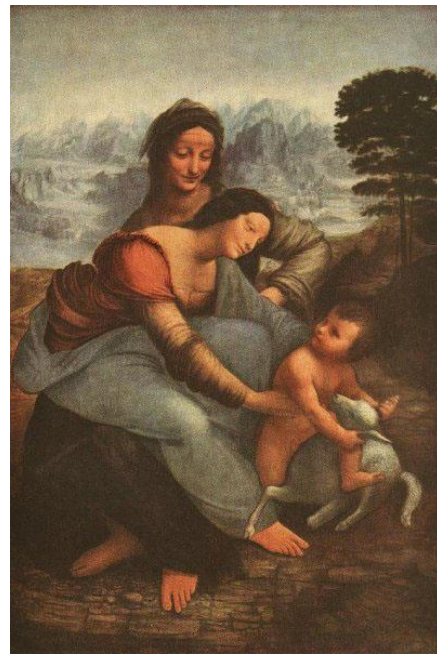
The two pieces of art below, both composed by Leonardo da Vinci around 1500, are two versions of the same subject. On the left is a charcoal sketch of the Virgin Mary with St. Anne, Jesus and St. John the Baptist. Leonardo used this sketch to compose the painting on the right, a painting of the same subject group (without John!). Paying attention to the differences between these two versions of the paintings will help you better understand how you should think about revising your essays.

Content:

In some important ways, these two pieces are the same. Look at the faces of the two women, as well as the general layout of their positions. Likewise, your own first drafts will certainly resemble your subsequent drafts in subject matter and sometimes form and style.



Draft



Revision

Editing:

Note that da Vinci edits out one of the figures in the sketch (John the Baptist), which gives the painting more balance and makes it less cluttered.

Style:

The style of the painting on the right is clearly smoother and carefully attended to. In the sketch, da Vinci gets the important things down (faces, positions, shading), but does so in a rough way. All of these details are brought together in the painting.

Organization:

Whereas the figures in the sketch are disorganized, those in the painting fall into the perfect triangular organization that Renaissance artists sought. Notice how the line of sight from the lamb through Mary makes almost a perfectly straight line in the painting, while in the sketch, the lines of sight are divided and skewed.

So, what has this anything to do with revising an essay, you ask? Note that when he went to do his painting, da Vinci did not simply stand in front of the canvas and make it up as he went along. He had a draft that he already had worked on that let him know how, roughly, he should paint his figures, where he would place them, etc. He further perfects this sketch, though, as he uses color, smoothes his lines, makes the painting more balanced and better organized, and adds more detail to the background and clothing. He does not, of course, simply change the sketch here and there, adding some lines, rubbing lines out, painting over with color, etc.

Nor should you!!! When you sit down to write a revision, think of your first draft as a sketch: something that gives you an idea of where you want to go, the general outlines of your essay, some strengths that you want to improve on.. Your first draft should be like a sketch in that it roughly outlines the major points of the paper, paying some attention to style, but more dedicated to the idea of getting down your ideas and the main thrust of your essay. It is then in revision that you smooth out the rough edges and turn your sketch into a polished piece of writing.

When I grade your revisions, I look for the difference between the two drafts to be like the difference between these two paintings. Revise comes from the Latin “re” meaning to do again and “vide” meaning “to see.” When you revise, make sure that you are seeing your essay again and recreating it into a finer draft.