Students often resist revising their work, viewing revision as a form of punishment or reducing it to merest proofreading and editing. However, studies show that the single most salient difference between student writers and successful, professional writers hinges on how they conceive of revision: unlike students, who revise in a fairly superficial, perfunctory way, the successful, professional writers are much more likely to think of revision in terms of massive change, the sort of global re-envisioning that fundamentally alters the structure and substance of a text. In this light, perhaps the essential goal of a writing course is getting students to revise more and more ambitiously, for this is at the center of the development of rhetorical ability. Of course, many teachers are hesitant to require much revision because they are already struggling to shoulder the burden of all the grading they must do. Therefore, here are some strategies for maximizing the role of revision in your writing class while minimizing both 1) the burden of commenting and grading; and 2) student resistance to revision.

Maximizing revision while minimizing the burden of responding and grading...

- Have students bring drafts to class and then pose a series of questions that will focus their reflections on the draft and generate improvements. After each question, allow students, say, ten minutes before moving to the next question, and then allow a block of time at the end of the class for students to synthesize their notes and organize a sense of the next steps they need to take.
- Comment in writing on just two or three drafts, then photocopy them for the whole class, distribute them, and devote the hour to guiding students through these models and elaborating on how and why you responded the way you did. As you elaborate on the comments, make regular suggestions for revision and try to generalize these comments into a body of advice for everyone. (Using an overhead projector here with transparencies also works, as does PowerPoint, but the advantage of hard-copy is that students can make notes on the draft as you talk about it).
- Later in the semester, design an assignment that requires students to revisit work from earlier in the semester, to transform, deepen, and expand that work in new ways. Also, throughout the semester, devise short, daily writing assignments that, over a span of a week or two, can be revised and connected into a larger project. As Adrienne Rich and others have noted, writing is always a kind of rewriting, a point we should bear in mind when designing assignments: ideally, every writing assignment invites students to revisit and revise earlier writing projects, expanding them, complicating them, connecting them, and developing them in new directions.
Maximizing revision, while minimizing student resistance to it…

- Cast problems in student texts not simply as errors, flaws, deficits, or failures but rather as potentially rich sites for invention, moments where a certain productive tension lurks that the student should open and explore for the imaginative and rhetorical possibilities it might be trying to engender. Just as a slip-of-the-tongue or malapropism can be a window into the unconscious, a rift in a paragraph can yield insights that point in the direction that the entire project should go.
- Emphasize repeatedly for your students the notion that growth in writing abilities might be defined, essentially, as increasing capacity to make ever more and ever larger changes in a text.
- Give students some very specific, even technical concepts for stylizing sentences and arranging paragraphs, so that revision can proceed not as endless, directionless drift, but as a rigorous and even playful experience of craft.