

Mini-lesson

Suggested lesson length: 20 to 30 minutes

The Red Pencil Is Your Best Friend

Goals

- Emphasize the importance of revision throughout the writing process.
- Help students identify their own reluctance to being edited and different points in the writing process when editing should occur.

Teacher Preparation

Make a transparency and copies of **The Writing-Revising Cycle** (p. 34).

Instructional Tasks

Ask students to think about what they dislike about making changes when writing a story or essay.

Point out that revision happens on many levels: ideas generated in the brainstorming process are thrown out, words are crossed out and replaced with better ones, punctuation is changed, phrases are added, sentences are totally deleted because they sound awkward or don't make sense, paragraphs and scenes are re-arranged. Share your own painful "red pencil" stories with your students. (My editing experiences include an editor cutting out 30,000 words from my first book. Similarly, before this book found its way into your classroom, it had been reorganized and rewritten more than five times.)

Instruct your students to line-out, rather than erase, the changes that they make.

Encourage them to save the various drafts of their stories, and to occasionally

review them. Sometimes writers end up returning to earlier choices. As Nancie

Atwell points out in *In the Middle*, students learn about the writing process when

they review the stages which they went through to create a finished product.

Using **The Writing-Revising Cycle** transparency, point out that the writing process is circular rather than linear. Each change a writer makes affects not only

what he writes next, but may also change what he has written previously.

Using student input, write two boring, wordy sentences on the board (see **How to Teach This**, next page). Ask students to help you line-out dull verbs and tired nouns and replace them with more vivid verbs and specific nouns. This activity can be repeated several times or done in pairs. Hand out copies of **The Writing-Revising Cycle** for students to keep in their binder.

Tip: *You are an important model of this revision process. As your students watch you modify your own writing on the board, they will learn to do the same. The give-and-take process which you generate with your students by leading them into dialogues like, “I don’t like my verb/noun/adjective in this sentence. It’s too boring and not very specific. How can we jazz up this writing?” shows them how real writers write.*

How to Teach This

You can teach this concept by writing a few simple sentences on the board. You can ask for student input in making up sentences on the spot, or you can use the following example.

“Maryanne walked into the room. She looked around her and was surprised that no one noticed her.”

After writing that, I could decide that *walked* is boring, so I could line it out and put in either *sneaked*, *strutted*, *skipped*, *stormed*, *pranced*, *cartwheeled*, or any number of other verbs. Then I could specify what type of room Maryanne entered. Was it a grand ballroom? A farm house kitchen? A computer lab in a space modular? Each of these specific details would not only change the setting but would also influence the description of Maryanne’s behavior. Now, depending on the changes I made, I would have to see if the second sentence still made sense and what new changes were necessary. The new sentences could read:

“Maryanne strutted into the locker room. She glared around her and was shocked that no one noticed her.”

By substituting *strut* for *walk*, *glare* for *look*, and *shocked* for *surprised*, and by placing Maryanne in the locker room, I have begun to create a much more interesting, visual scene. But then I might decide that *strut* doesn't really fit the anger in the word *glare*.

"Maryanne stormed into the locker room. She glared around her and was shocked that no one bothered to look up. Not one person noticed her."

In this third revision I chose the verb *storm* which prompted the addition of the *no one bothered to look up* phrase. I then added the final sentence for emphasis, but it didn't seem strong enough. A final revision could be:

"Maryanne stormed into the locker room. She glared around her and was shocked that no one bothered to look up. Not one of her supposed friends seemed to notice her."

Substituting *supposed friends* for *person* sets the scene for more conflict and also

hooks the reader into wanting to read more. The writing-revising cycle is invaluable as your students learn that revision is an integral part in creating vivid characters and settings which *show*, rather than *tell*, their stories.