Monsters! Ink!

Lesson Eleven

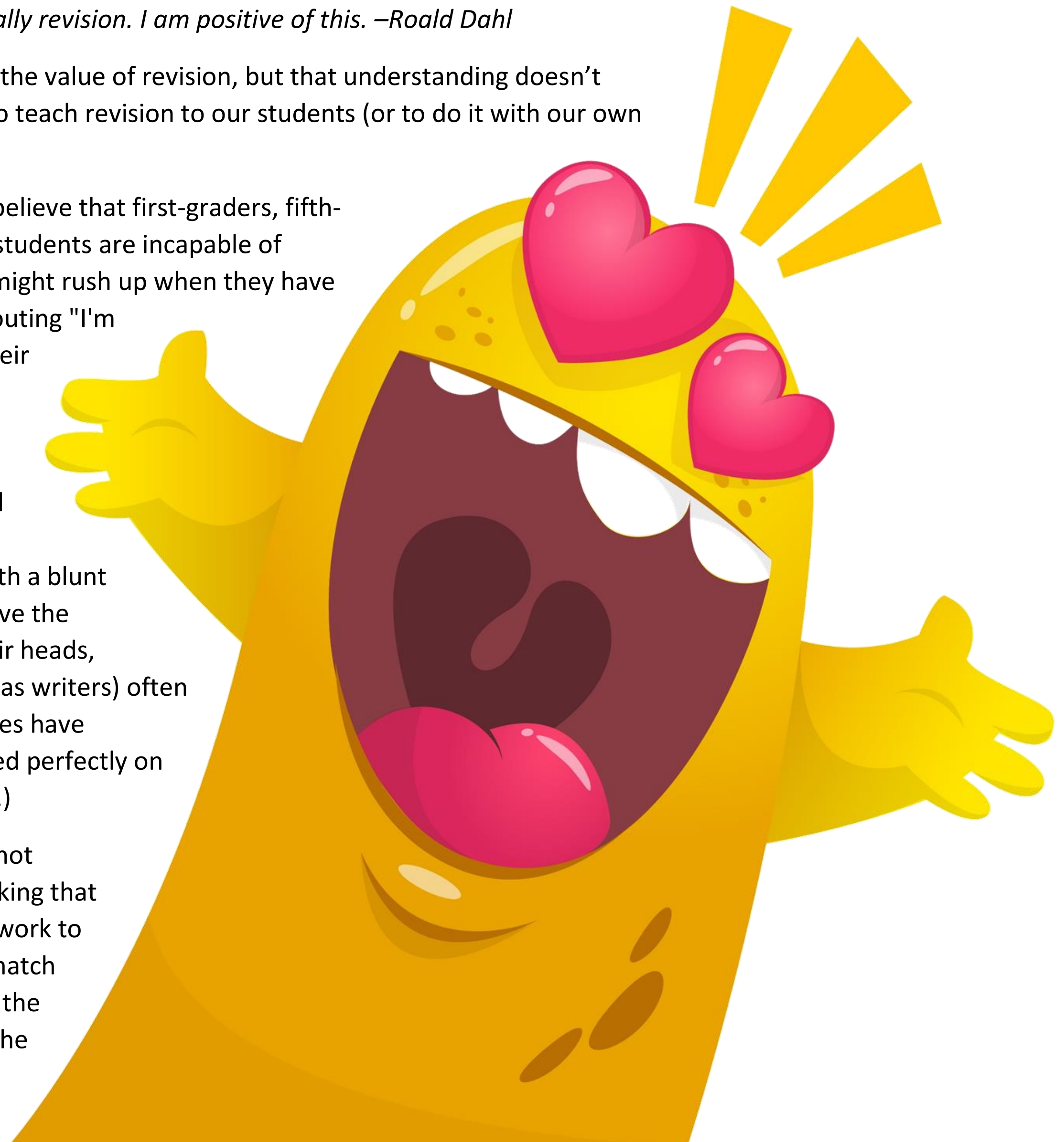
Falling in Love with Revision

The following is based on an essay, “Four Principles Toward Teaching the Craft of Revision,” by Mark Farrington, with the Northern Virginia Writing Project, published in The Quarterly, Vol. 21, No. 2.

The beautiful part of writing is that you don’t have to get it right the first time, unlike, say, a brain surgeon. -Robert Cormier

Good writing is essentially revision. I am positive of this. –Roald Dahl

Most of us understand the value of revision, but that understanding doesn’t always make it easier to teach revision to our students (or to do it with our own writing!)

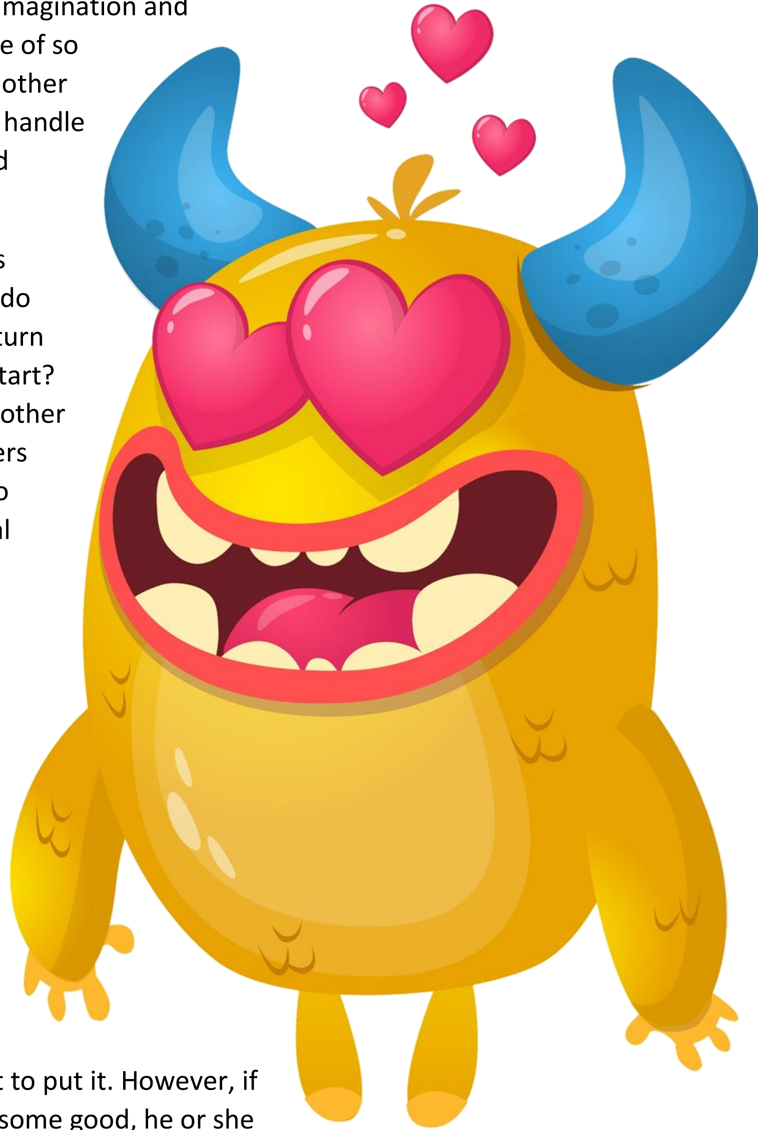


It can become easy to believe that first-graders, fifth-graders, or even older students are incapable of revision. First-graders might rush up when they have finished their work, shouting "I'm done!" while waving their papers in front of your nose. Gentle questions such as "Is there anything else you could add to your story?" are invariably answered with a blunt "No." (Because they have the complete stories in their heads, students (and even we as writers) often believe that those stories have therefore been rendered perfectly on the paper before them.)

So perhaps we end up not pressing the issue, thinking that students have enough work to do in learning how to match sounds to letters, form the letters, and figure out the difference between letters and words,

not to mention learning how to generate topics for their writing. Asking them to then revisit their work, analyze it in terms of its effectiveness in communicating their thinking, and change it accordingly might seem to be pushing things.

At the same time, however, we might also believe that when students of any age are given appropriate support and structure, they are capable of deep thinking and learning, seeing evidence in the classroom that they can comprehend sophisticated stories, solve math problems using elegant strategies of their own devising, and write with great imagination and surprising insight. If they are capable of so much higher-level thinking in every other area, why shouldn't they be able to handle revision? With the right support and structure, they can.



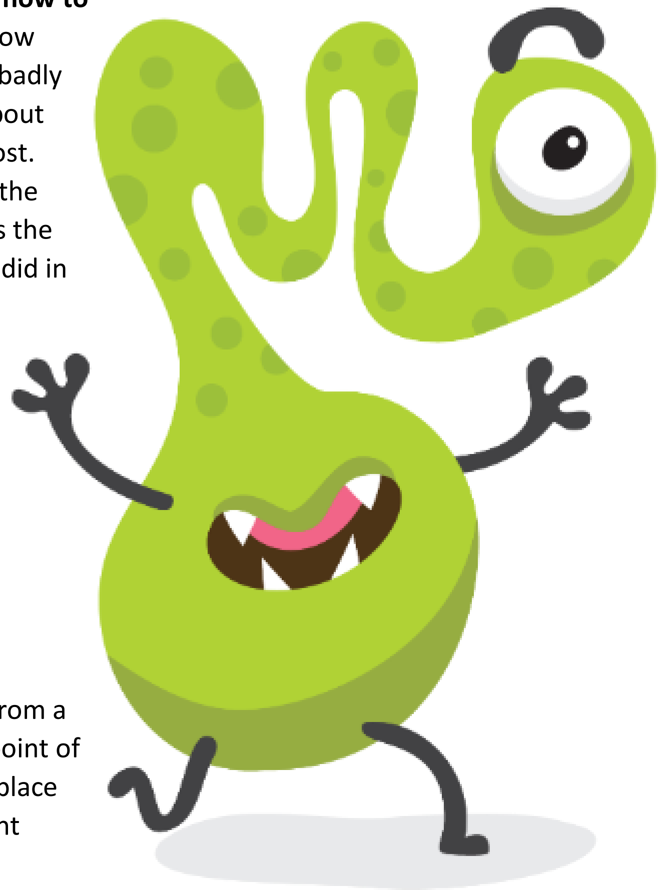
As anyone who works with students knows, to say that you are going to do something does not mean you can turn around and do it. So where do we start? Well, how do *we* use revision, or another question, how do professional writers use revision? What drives anyone to revise? Responses from professional writers suggest the following key principles about revision.

Revision works best when:

1. **The writer believes there is some good in their original piece.** If the writer believes there's nothing good in the piece, the trash basket is the only place he/she/they will want to put it. However, if the writer believes there is some good, he or she might want to work a little harder.
2. **The writer believes the writing can be made better.** A writer who believes a piece is totally perfect, or at least beyond their ability to improve, is not ready to revise. Sometimes the author(s) just need a little time away from the piece, a little distance. Providing that time or space to leave and come back to a piece in classroom can be a challenge at times. (Sometimes portfolios allow students to achieve some distance.) If you can't provide that time it falls to peers or the instructor to convince the author that the piece can be better. Interaction is a key to motivation, and it's the interaction that keeps everyone writing.

Small groups or even whole-class workshops are best for this, such as the activities we are going to do in this lesson. Hearing four or twenty-four voices saying similar things carries weight. If it's coming from the teacher, the role that the teacher has chosen to play becomes critical. Is teacher judge or helper? Students respond much better when they view the instructor as someone who genuinely wants to help with improving a piece of writing for the story's sake, not someone who just wants to evaluate and 'fix' it and/or rewrite it the way they would have done it.

3. **The writer has some reason to make it better.** Revision is hard work and everyone needs a reason to do it. Sometimes that reason is pride, a grade, publication, or sometimes that reason is even simply practice. Teaching revision sometimes means practicing the techniques of revision. *Samples of fun exercises and ideas follow*. Playing at revision often brings fun surprises where we learn more about characters, change the significance of events by changing pace, etc. When they come, revision doesn't seem like such hard work anymore.
4. **The writer has some plan for figuring out how to make it better.** If you (or your student) know the piece can be improved and want very badly to improve it but don't know how to go about doing it you'll just end up frustrated and lost. This is where teacher and peer input, and the teacher's role, can become critical, such as the input they received from the activities we did in Lesson Eleven.



Playing with Revision

Students can benefit from a variety of eclectic, classroom-tested techniques.

Exercises like, "Write the beginning of your story from a different character's point of view, or a different point of view, just to see if you can do it" or "find another place other than the first sentence where you story might begin," are valuable.

They show student writers that possibilities that exist in writing. Writing is flexible and alive and often the result of decisions the writer has made, consciously or not. **Realizing they have the power to go back, change decisions, and then witness the consequence of those changes is a valuable experience for all writers (of any age or experience level) to have.**

Part of the groundwork is getting young writers into the habit of rereading their writing. This is one habit to encourage from the start because a writer needs to see the effect of the words he already has on paper before he can think about whether and how to change them.

In his fiction writing class, Farrington asks students to choose a spot in the story where the main character does something that is crucial to the rest of the story. At that moment, Farrington says, they **must** make the character do the exact opposite. That doesn't mean you have to get rid of your idea entirely…but see where a different direction takes you, at least temporarily, *Ex. Your character is approaching a wall, and he/she going over the wall is the critical point of your story, what they discover on the other side sets everything in motion. By making them walk away from the wall, what happens? Do they have inner turmoil? Do they feel like they have to go back, is something pulling at him/her that can't be explained? When they then turn back and head towards the wall (see, you don't have to totally give up your original idea if you don't want to—just have your character do the opposite of what you had them do, at that moment) how do they feel? Are they frightened? Excited?* What happened with that revision? What was added? Ex. tension, the audience learned a little more about the character, significance was added to them climbing the wall so the reader is as anticipatory of what's on the other side as the character is.

Practice can also sometimes turn into play. For example, you might ask students to: add five colors, add four action verbs, add three sensory details, add two transitional words or phrases, add one metaphor. If they can't do it with their own work, have them switch stories and try.

Peering Deeper

Sometimes we have ideas that make perfect sense to us, but seem to lose or confuse readers when we put them on the page. (Remember that because they have the complete stories in their heads, students (and even we as writers) often believe that those stories have therefore been rendered perfectly on the paper before them.)

Once students have a complete draft of a story, they need interesting and effective ways to share their ideas to learn points where their ideas need further development. With feedback from an audience, students are better able to see the final decisions they still need to make in order for their ideas to reach someone. These decisions may be ones of word choice, organization, logic, evidence, and tone. Keep in mind that this juncture can be unsettling for some students. Having made lots of major decisions in getting their ideas down on the page, they may be reluctant to tackle another round of decision-making required for revising or clarifying ideas or sentences. Remind students that ideas don't exist apart from words, but in the words themselves. They will need to be able to sell their ideas and tell their story through the words and arrangement of words on the page.

Time for Story Editing

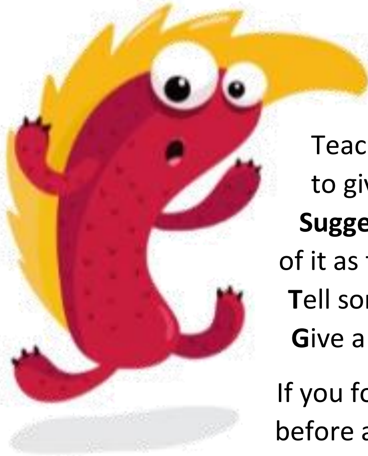
- The co-authors/you work with a partner or multiple partners to refine the story and get feedback and suggestions.
- The editor and editing process is the last line of defense for finding errors and ensuring that it is a quality story.

Tip: Show students how to revise specific aspects of their writing to make it more coherent and clear by modeling. Model this by reading your own writing and do a think aloud about how you could add more details and make it clearer. Teach students to reread their own work more than once as they think about whether it really conveys what they want to their reader. Reading their work aloud to classmates and other adults helps them to understand what revisions are needed. Hearing your own words out-loud gives you the vicarious experience of being someone else.

'Plussing' a.k.a. Constructive Feedback

Peer review refers to the many ways in which students can share their creative work with peers for constructive feedback and then use this feedback to revise and improve their work. Interaction is a key to motivation, and it's the interaction that keeps everyone writing.

When editing stories (or coming up with new story ideas) the general rule is that you may only criticize an idea if you *also add a constructive suggestion*. Hence the name *plussing*. The practice has been built on the core principles from improvisation, which are: accept all offers (accept the idea, don't reject it), use "yes, **and** …" instead of "yes, but …", and make your partner look good.



Teach students to use these three steps to give peer feedback: **Compliments, Suggestions, and Corrections,** or think of it as the TAG method if that's easier. **T**ell something you like, **A**sk a Question, **G**ive a Compliment.

If you follow these principles, dialogue before and during the editing process becomes more like a structured debate that's both serious and yet constructive. It's not an attempt to gloss over the hard stuff. Discussions still involve challenging problems, like possibly rejecting initial ideas, but this is done always with a view to replacing them with a better solution.

Teacher Tip: Learning the Lingo

With younger students use a sharing circle or author's chair as a time to expose them to language they can use when discussing writing. After writing time is over, children take turns reading their work to the class and taking compliments, questions, and comments from their audience. I sit in the audience, too, and raise my hand, hoping to be called on. The great thing about being a teacher is that even if you don't get called on, you still get to make your point: "I love how you added so many details to your writing. You made a picture in my head." Or "I like how you used describing words to tell what your toy looks like." Or "I'm confused about this part of your story. Can you tell us more about it?" Before long the students begin mimicking you, using this language themselves.

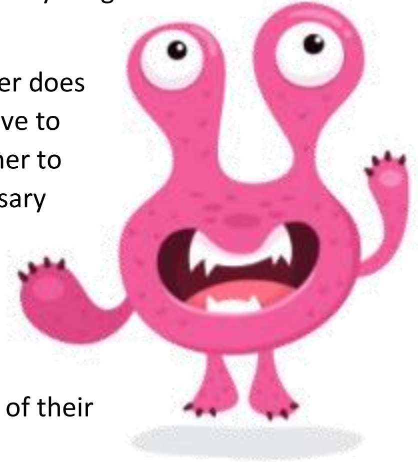
A key element achieved is respectful listening, and ongoing respect for the talents and abilities of the storyteller.

The true task is to eliminate the language that destroys creativity – language like "yes, but …" or "that'll never work …" and replace these with language that shifts the focus to adding value – language like "yes, and …" or "what if …" or "how might we do this? …". This is how the practice of plussing begins.

One of the core principles is to separate the people from the problem, and thus take the focus off personal issues to avoid negativity. People often can feel that a rejection of their idea is a rejection of *them*. Once that new behavior is recognized as a *required* behavior, it can then evolve into a standard

practice for students. But it must be required and practiced, first and foremost, by the leaders, in other words, modeled by the teacher.

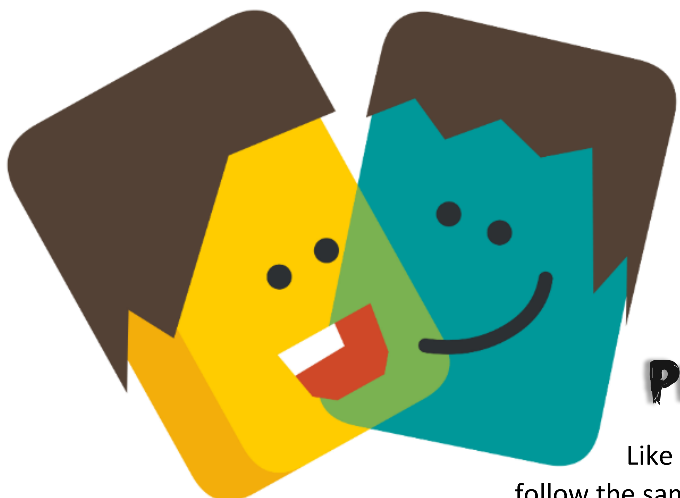
Note, it is not uncommon for at least one member of the writing group to say, "I don't have any questions" or "I can't think of any suggestions" when reading a story. In response to this, give prompts such as, "Was there anything you wanted to know more about?" or "Was anything confusing to you?"



Also, remember, the editor has no final authority. This is crucial: the writer does not have to follow any of the specific suggestions given, but also, they have to keep the question of what's best for the story in mind. It is up to him or her to figure out how to address the feedback, taking the time and space necessary to think through challenging problems and solutions at length.

Sometimes, children incorporate all the suggestions they receive. Sometimes, children will identify their own goals for revision and make changes accordingly. The expectation is that they will make at least one change, either based on a suggestion from the group or on one of their own ideas. More often than not, they'll follow through on one of the suggestions.

Do not expect that every child will transform every piece he or she writes. That's unrealistic, given both the developmental range that shapes the nature of teaching and learning in the primary classroom, and the fact that not every piece of writing needs to be transformed. Instead, the ultimate goal is that every child gains a deeper understanding of what it means to be a writer. Writing is more than merely putting words down on paper: it is an interaction between the author and his audience. It is a complicated process to teach and to learn. But with time, some thoughtful planning, the expectation that it will happen, and the helpful advice of peers in a writing group, revision can be done, and done well—even in first grade.



Pick & Choose!

Peer Editing Methods:

Like any classroom activity, editing can grow stale if we always follow the same format. Several methods are outlined below. Find which ones work for your group! Any gimmick that has kids begging for revision strategies is a keeper. And use several different methods and allow for multiple trades. Hearing 4 or 24 voices saying the same thing about your story has a lot more impact than just one.

The five-highlighter exercise

Ask students to assign a different color of highlighter to each of the five senses, then create a key at the top of a draft so they can remember which is which. Or create a standard one as a class and make a poster as a reminder up on the board for students to use as a reference guide, ex. blue is for visual, pink for hearing, yellow for touch, etc. As students read their own or a partner's draft, they mark sensory details with the corresponding color. After the draft is marked, students hold it up and look at it as if it were an abstract painting. If there's very little color, the draft needs more sensory detail. If one color predominates, the student should try to incorporate more of the other senses. If it looks like an undiscovered Jackson Pollock, perhaps the student has gone overboard with description.

Kathleen gives the following example in her essay, "Jesse's story of a fight on the playground was a masterpiece of blue, his sense-of-sight color, but the other senses were scarcely represented. So to his

original sentence, "All I can remember was me getting on top of him and punching him in his face," he added a pink, hearing detail, "and hearing the kids yell, 'hit him in his face' and his heavy breathing and groaning." Challenged by his peer editors to use senses other than vision and handed a green and orange highlighter, Ian enhanced his description of football practice: "We were having our first practice in full gear on the hottest day of the summer. The heat made us dizzy." He added, "The adrenalin built up inside me like a bottle. I got set and my senses were at their highest level. My hearing alerted me to Coach inhaling to blow on the whistle.""

Tell Me Somethin' Good!

Post-it Notes make it easy to put into action Peter Elbow's reflective feedback technique, "telling." Telling requires responders to describe their reactions as they read. Telling and other Elbow strategies tend to make students' feedback more useful than the usual, "I liked it; it was good" that you end up with regularly if you don't direct student responses. Often when you require a written response on a Post-it instead of merely allowing students to respond verbally, the responders take their duties more seriously and, with practice, the quality of their remarks improves.
So, for instance, as Kathleen O'Shaughnessy notes in her essay, a student demonstrates the telling technique with this on a Post-It note: "While I was reading your piece, I felt like I was riding a rollercoaster. It started out kinda slow, but you could tell there was something exciting coming up. But then it moved real fast and stopped all of a sudden. I almost needed to read it again the way you ride a rollercoaster over again because it goes by too fast." This response is certainly more useful to the writer than the usual, "I think you could like, add some more details, you know?" that is often overheard in response meetings.

Also, you may want to have students m**ark the powerlines.** Encourage them to use their Post-it Notes to also tag short passages of effective description. They may be similes, metaphors, or just good writing that is chock full of vivid images. A characteristic of a powerline is the ability to move a reader with a clear mental image whether it's to laugh, smile, or shudder. Ex. "She had a voice like slow thunder and sweet rain,"—Patricia Polacco.

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF MY...? Writers as well as responders make use of Post- its. Ask the author of a piece to attach specific questions about the draft. They can do this to prepare for a "blind conference" in which students use pseudonyms to identify their drafts. For each question, editors should respond on that post it note and give the authors something specific to consider. If someone has already commented, they can say whether they agree, disagree, and add more.

BLIND CONFERENCE

Give the piece (under a pseudonym that you, the instructor, have kept track of! You'll want to make a list of your co-authorships and their pseudonyms because the authors themselves may forget!) to a responder in a different class. This method attempts to remedy the circumstances in which students who work together every day are sometimes uncomfortable giving what might be seen by the author as negative feedback, or in other cases, giving, because of personal feelings about the author, nothing but negative feedback. Blind conferences create a level of objectivity that might not exist in face-to-face meetings and provide a more genuine experience of writing for an audience, since most of us don't know all of our readers personally.

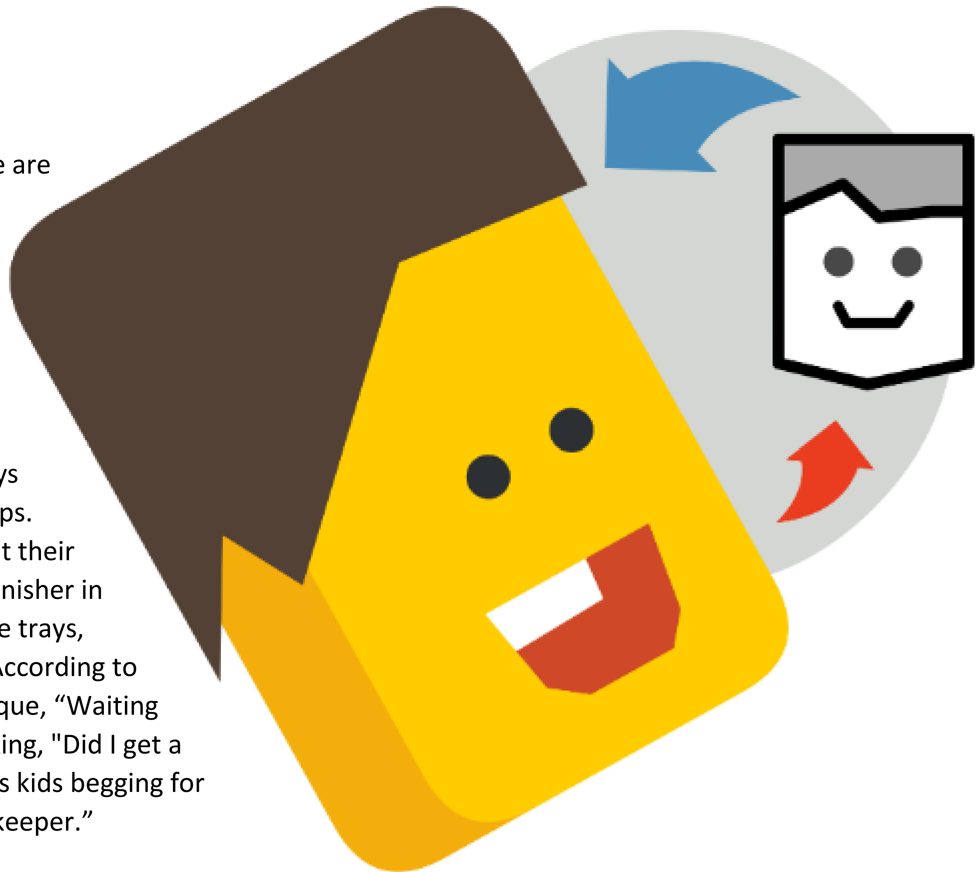
Typically, a draft will get handed around to several readers, and the author will get more than one answer to each Post-It Note question. Kathleen O'Shaughnessy gave the example from her class that one writer, working under the pseudonym Orange Banana, asked, "Do I have a good attention grabber here?" and got four responses. Three were generic: "It's okay," "No. Be more specific," and "Yeah, it was good." But one was calculated to get the writer thinking in

new directions: "Say how nervous you were before the game." Now Orange Banana has something specific to consider.

Responders are only required to answer the author's questions on the same Post-it Note, but they often attach new ones to add further, unsolicited advice. G.I. Joe's story about a baseball game came back with a yellow note with this advice: "The story doesn't feel over. What did you gain from the experience? What did you lose? Learn? Did you get a moral? What happens next?" Encourage responders to critique the other critiques. On a hot-pink Post-it, four different students responded. The first student wrote, "Explode the moment when you were running at him." Others added, "I agree," "I agree also," and "Whoever wrote this was right. What did you feel?" According to Kathleen, the final draft that G.I. Joe later turned in, under his real name, was quite different from the draft he'd submitted to his unknown responders.

Swap Meet

If you have multiple classes, or there are multiple classes in your program, orchestrate whole-class swaps, requiring everyone to turn in a draft with two or three questions attached that you will then hand out to a different class later in the day or the next day. Or make this activity voluntary. Keep stacking trays labeled with the different class groups. Students who want feedback can put their drafts in their class's tray. An early finisher in another class can wander over to the trays, take out a draft, and respond to it. According to Kathleen, when she uses this technique, "Waiting authors will enter class each day asking, "Did I get a response yet?" Any gimmick that has kids begging for revision strategies is, in my book, a keeper."



'Gossipy' Reading!

This method, as described by Peter Kittle, is a transformation of interrupted reading into peer response.

Notes & Tips: *This type of peer response works best when students have at least some experience with interrupted reading strategies (described in the text box on the next page). As some students might also take the "gossipy" aspect of the strategy a little too literally, you might want to address the issue of appropriate topics for 'gossiping' prior to the revision workshop, to allow things to go more smoothly.*

Ask your participants to form groups of three, or four. One person/co-authorship will offer their story for scrutiny, which will be read aloud by the remaining pair.

As with the interrupted reading strategy, one person should read aloud, while the other should stop the reading to call attention to details, raise questions, predict, make connections, etc. Through this process, the readers would talk about the paper, how it was working, what meaning they were making, what they found confusing, and so on. The pair doing the reading, in other words, would "gossip" about the paper.

Sample Conversation:

Monica: Stop for a second. I don't get who's talking here.

Jenn: Me either.

Monica: And who's Williamson?

Jenn: That's Louis!

Monica: It is?

Jenn: Yeah—last name.

Monica: Oh. But I still don't know who's saying this.

Jenn: Let me keep going. It'll probably tell in a second.

What is 'Interrupted reading'?

Teachers using this cold-reading strategy put students into pairs, and the students then take turns reading aloud to one another. The nonreading student is encouraged to stop the reader at any point in order to make predictions, ask questions, clarify meanings, draw inferences, summarize points, make connections, visualize ideas, point out discrepancies, and so on. Because in practice this means that the reader is often disrupted, as a group we began referring to this particular strategy as simply "interrupted reading." -Peter Kittle

The paper's writer(s), meanwhile, listened and reads along, but are not allowed to respond in any way to the comments made by the gossiping pair. The writer is forced to listen to the ways readers constructed meaning from the text he or she or they have produced. When the paper has been read, and discussed in its entirety, then—and only then—is the writer free to join the conversation.

Through this reading-as-revision process, writers have the opportunity to hear the thoughts that go through the heads of their papers' readers as they work out a story's meaning for the first time.

As a result of the interchange in the example, Louis was able to focus on the way he began his paper. He not only knew that the introduction needed work, but he also knew what effect its original form had on readers. The process had shown him what he had to do to meet his readers' needs.

Insight into what needed revision simply arose by hearing the readers talk about what did and didn't make sense. Wrap-up

discussions among all group members help writers clarify and gain advice about how to go about the revision process itself.

'Speed Dating' or QuickTime Peer-Review

The format is pretty simple, though it requires some preparation and classroom reorganization.

Set up:

1. Each student needs a copy of their story.
2. Move the chairs (and, if the room has them, tables) so that there are two concentric rings of chairs. The chairs in the inner ring should face the chairs in the outer ring. Make sure students sit in the rings.
3. Bring some music to class—a song that plays for approximately 4 minutes. It can be instrumental, it can be the Jeopardy count down song, just choose something appropriate that won't distract students. You can even simply use a kitchen timer.
4. Students need to get out their printed introductions, one piece of paper, and a pen or pencil.

After this preparation, the process is pretty simple. When the music starts, facing pairs of students exchange stories. *You may choose to have students focus on just one part of the story (ex. The introduction paragraph), two sections (the introduction and conclusion), or have them review the whole story.*

They read each other's stories and then give their partners one specific piece of advice (using the strategies of 'plussing' and Compliments, Suggestions, & Corrections) about how to improve their (ex. introductions, introductions & conclusions, or the whole story). Have them give the best tip that they could or ask specific questions about the piece and try to get a good answer within the time limits. This advice is delivered aurally, and students write down their partner's advice on their papers. **The teacher can and should model this process. The teacher can even participate in the exercise itself, especially if numbers are uneven.**

Hopefully they can do this before the song ends (which doesn't always happen in the first round but almost always happens within a few rounds).

When the music stops, the students in the inner ring stand up and rotate to the next partner. Restart the music and they begin the process again.

Ex. In one classroom, the teacher asked students to review the whole story in 5 minutes and they each did 4 "dates" and then flipped roles.

This format is helpful for several reasons:

1. It's focused. Students hone in on a single aspect of their papers, which makes the workshop less overwhelming, especially for less confident writers.
2. It's cumulative. At the end of the workshop, tell students to look through the list of suggestions their classmates made and identify trends. "It you see three or four comments pertaining to one element of your introduction," tell them, "you know to work on that." This addresses one of the most common problems with peer review workshops—uneven partnerships. In this format one unhelpful editor does not sink students' stories.
3. It changes the pace of the class. Students have fun with the music and the frequent movement and there are usually moments of laughter during the "shifts."

NOTE: You can also use this as a brainstorming activity or strategy. Bring in a kitchen timer and set it for five minutes. Have students discuss ideas with one another and the listener needs to build on the speaker's topic or give alternative suggestions - suggestions can be as outlandish as they want. Have them take turns and share ideas for five minutes then rotate around the room.

Pick & Choose!

'Highlighting' Effective Self-Editing Strategies

The five-highlighter exercise

The five-highlighter exercise, as described above, also works well as a self-editing strategy for authors/co-authors.

Highlighting Sentence structure

We don't know why so many students still write sentence fragments and run-ons in spite of all the red ink their English teachers have spilled in the cause of eradicating them. The following two highlighter tricks from Kathleen O'Shaughnessy are not guaranteed to succeed where all that red ink has failed, but they do make visual a concept that seems too abstract for many students to grasp.

Spot Test: Ask students to highlight the ending punctuation marks in a draft, then put an index finger on the first highlighted spot and put the other index finger on the next highlighted spot. If their fingers are two or three words apart, they may have a fragment. If their fingers are waving to each other from across a vast expanse of ink, they may have a run-on. Ex. When Joey saw the gap between the first and last words of "It was a sunny day in October and everyone at school was at lunch outside playing soccer or talking about what they were doing for Halloween, me, on the other hand, I was at the soccer field watching everyone play.," he recognized for himself that he had a run-on, and I didn't even have to try explaining to him what's wrong with the "me, on the other hand, I . . ." part of his sentence.

Counting Verbs: In another test for run-ons, ask students to highlight all the verbs in a draft, then check each sentence for highlighted spots. A sentence with more th an two verbs may be a run-on or it may need careful punctuation, as in a compound sentence. Ex. When Patrick highlighted and counted six verbs in the following sentence, he knew he needed to edit it:

"Someone all of a sudden *threw* me the ball and when I *looked* up I *saw* the four eighth graders *chasing* me and all I could do was *run* so I *ran*.

Color Changing Dialogue

Here is a query high on the list of life's unanswerable questions: Why is it so difficult to remember that a change of speaker requires a new paragraph? Rather than repeatedly asking your students this question, Kathleen O'Shaughnessy suggests we give these directions: Highlight each character's name the first time it's mentioned in a draft, using a different color for each character. Then, throughout the draft, highlight each character's speeches in his/her assigned color. When it's time for a final draft, don't mix colors in a single paragraph. When the color changes, start a new paragraph.

Sample Supply List Lesson Twelve

Lesson Materials

- Rough drafts from Lesson Ten, with plot twists incorporated, from each co-authorship & the instructor
- Paper
- Pencils
- Post-It notes
- Sets of 5 colors of highlighters for each co-authorship
- Music
- Timer

Pacing Guide:

This lesson has been designed to take Two to three 75-minute sessions to complete.

Make sure to try several styles of peer and self-review and revision Activities and challenges. Give your students enough time to truly edit one or more stories, go through and process the feedback they receive on their stories, and practice revision techniques. Hearing 4 or 24 voices saying the same thing carries a lot more weight than just one.

This process may take More or less Time depending on the needs of your classroom and the abilities of your students.